

Harry's Future

The following is Part 1 of Harry's Future, a possible continuation of Harry's adventure suggested by the final chapter and epilogue of book 7. The characters and locations are of course the intellectual property of JK Rowland. Additional characters and situations have been developed for the purpose of this particular storyline.

Harry's Future Part 1.

As Harry, Ron and Hermione left Dumbledore's office, for that was how Harry would always think of it, he stopped them at the bottom of the staircase. Harry was tired. More tired than he could ever remember being. He scrubbed at his face with his hands and then looked at his best friends. They too looked all done in.

"Ron, Hermione, I'm exhausted. I think you are too. Ron, I need to talk to your mum for a minute but I can't stand the idea of walking back into that crowded hall. I'm going to hide under the Invisibility Cloak and come up behind her. Would you let her know I'm there so I can whisper to her?"

"Sure thing, Harry. I'm ready for a long kip myself." He took Hermione by the hand, smiling shyly at her. "We'll walk in front so no one runs into you."

"Thanks, Ron."

He swirled the robe around his shoulders and pulled it up over his head. Ron and Hermione turned and slowly walked down the hall with Harry silently trudging behind them. They eventually made their way to the Great Hall where people still sat in knots at the tables or stood in groups here and there. No one spoke loudly or celebrated the final defeat of Voldemort and his dreaded Death Eaters. There had been too many losses for it to be more than the most bittersweet of occasions. The Weasleys sat at the senior end of the Gryffindor table. Ginny was still leaning against her mother's shoulder as Harry had last seen her. Mr. Weasley sat on his wife's other side holding one hand in his. Across the table Bill, Charlie, Percy and George sat side

by side largely silent but occasionally whispering a comment to one or other of them.

Mr. Weasley was the first to see Ron and Hermione come to stand at the head of the table. He gave them a small tired smile.

“Ah, there you are, son, Hermione. Where’s Harry? Is he alright?” The rest of the family looked up, concern showing through their grief.

“He’s fine, Dad,” Ron said quietly. “He’s right behind you under his Invisibility Cloak. He needs to talk to Mum but he doesn’t want anyone to notice he’s here.”

Mrs. Weasley raised her head up a bit.

“Harry, dear, what is it? Are you alright?”

The note of such genuine concern in her voice, despite the loss of her son, was enough to break Harry’s heart. He took a deep, quiet breath and then leaned forward and spoke in raspy whisper.

“Mrs. Weasley, I need to talk to you and the rest of the family but I’m nearly asleep on my feet. Can we talk sometime tomorrow? This is pretty important and I don’t know who else I can turn to.”

She turned as if to talk to her husband and whispered back to where she felt Harry was.

“Of course, Harry, dear. It will take some time to get this all under control so I think we’ll have time to sort you out. We’re all here for you.”

“Thank you,” was the best he could squeeze out through a tightening throat. He swallowed and then leaned sideways toward Ginny.

“Ginny?”

“Yes, Harry?”

"I need to talk to you too; about a lot of things but right now I just need to ask one question."

"Yes?"

"What's the password? I need to lie down before I fall down."

Ginny couldn't help but laugh but before she could answer, Mrs. Weasley spoke.

"Ginny, you go with Harry, Ron and Hermione. Take your brothers with you. You all need sleep and the tower is as good a place as any. And don't even think to argue with me, not now, not tonight."

She got a series of subdued 'Yes, Mum' in response and her children all rose and slowly followed behind Ginny as she led them to the Fat Lady. She looked down at them, somber and subdued,

"Password?"

"Dumbledore."

She gave a wan smile and swung out of the way.

Ginny led the way in, Hermione next and then the boys came in behind them. Harry had slipped off his cloak before crawling in. Once inside they gathered together in the common room. Ginny stood before Harry, looking into his tired, bright green eyes. Tears began to run down her cheeks and she pulled him to her and hugged him tightly, her head against his chest. Ron had his arm around Hermione, his brothers standing in a loose arc beside them. It was Bill who spoke first.

"Let's get to bed, tomorrow will be here soon enough and we need some rest. Harry, I don't know what else to say but thanks. For all of us."

Harry gave a brief smile over the top of Ginny's head but remained silent. He gave her a last squeeze and then stepped back.

“G’night” was all he could manage and he turned and trudged up the stairs to his old room. Ron and his brothers fell in behind, Ginny and Hermione headed for the girls dorm. Ron and Harry went to their room while the brothers took the one just below. Harry took no notice of the room other than to pull the curtains aside and tumble onto the bed. He was asleep before he knew it. For the rest of his life he would be forever amazed that his sleep was deep and dreamless. He was awakened in the morning by knocking on the bedroom door. He rolled over and began to climb out of bed but the door was opened before he could get to it. Bill poked his head in, a small smile on his scarred face.

“Alright there, Harry?”

“Yeah, I’m okay, Bill. Slept pretty well in fact.”

“Good, Ron and Neville are already downstairs. We thought we’d give you some extra time for a lie in. They’re serving breakfast down in the Great Hall.”

Harry wasn’t really surprised that he hadn’t heard Neville come in, or maybe he was already in bed when he and Ron had stumbled in. He was feeling a great deal better this morning, at least physically but his mind was still spinning when he thought of what had occurred yesterday. Voldemort was dead, his Death Eaters dead, captured or fleeing. A great shadow was gone from the world but so were a number of friends. Most bitter was the loss of Fred Weasley. As he walked down the steps everyone in the common room looked up at him. He sought out Ginny and gave her a small smile. He looked at Ron and Hermione, truly grateful that they had survived the trial they had all shared. He then saw George looking up at him, his eyes looking slightly glassy, his face set in a bewildered cast. And there was Neville, looking much less the harried herbology student and more like the young man who had made his fearsome grandmother proud last night. As he walked across the floor the small crowd gathered around him. Ginny laid her hand on his arm, others patted him on the back or shoulder with a number of ‘well dones’ and ‘good on ya, Harry’. After a few minutes he looked around and said,

“Thanks, we all did a good job yesterday. I don’t know about you but I’m starved. What say we head down for breakfast?”

This got a few chuckles and the group began to file out through the hole and past the Fat Lady. Harry hung back and let the taller brothers Weasley precede him into the Great Hall, hoping to avoid notice. It didn’t work. It appeared that many of the students who had evacuated the school had returned and so did many of their parents. The Hall was quite full and they all seemed to be standing and applauding, many craning their necks or standing on benches to get a better look at Harry. He smiled sheepishly and gave a little wave and then looked at the others helplessly and shrugged.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried over and motioned for them to take seats at the end of the Gryffindor table that they were holding for them.

“Sorry, Harry. We should have warned you,” Mr. Weasley apologized.

“It’s ok, Mr. Weasley,” Harry replied as he squeezed in between Ginny and Ron. He felt Ginny lean into him a bit and then straighten up.

“Alright, you lot. Tuck in and don’t stop till you’ve eaten your fill. Heaven knows you’ll need it.”

She didn’t have to say it twice as bowls and platters were passed around and emptied in short order. Harry managed to maintain his composure and finish his meal despite the many eyes that seemed to follow his every move. He could hear Mrs. Weasley clucking her tongue in dismay as she and her husband did their best to shield him and the rest from the more aggressive of the inquisitive. As they finished up Mr. Weasley bent down to whisper to Harry.

“Harry, I’ve spoken to Professor McGonagall and she said we could use her Transfiguration classroom to have our little chat.”

“Thanks, Mr. Weasley, can we do it now?”

"Of course, Harry," he replied as he stood up. "Ok, you lot. Follow me."

The Weasley family, plus Harry and Hermione, trooped out of the Great Hall and down the corridor until they came to the door of the Transfiguration classroom. Mr. Weasley opened the door and held it as the rest walked in. He closed the door behind him as he entered and then used his wand to seal the room. Next he waved his wand and the desks slid to the side of the room leaving only chairs which Mrs. Weasley arranged in a circle with her wand. They all took seats. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sat directly across from Harry, Ginny to his right, Ron to his left and Hermione to Ron's left. The brothers took the last seats.

"Alright, Harry, dear. We're here and ready to listen."

Harry took a deep breath and looked around at them all.

"First, I just want to say how sorry I am about Fred, I can't help thinking if I had.."

Before he could finish his thought Mr. Weasley leaned forward in his chair and fixed Harry with a firm look.

"Harry, if you're about to say something about any of this, especially Fred, is somehow your fault, don't. The only one to blame for any, and all, of this is You-Know...dammit, Voldemort and his followers. You've done more than anyone, or perhaps, all of us combined to finish him off and we won't hear anymore about apologies for this or that. We appreciate how you feel about Fred, we'll all miss him terribly but we, you, have to go on. Now, what else would you like to say?"

Harry was a little taken aback by how firmly Mr. Weasley talked but he saw the understanding in his eyes and with an encouraging nod from Mrs. Weasley he swallowed once and continued.

"Well, as for going on, that's what I wanted to talk about. To be honest, I didn't really think I'd get this far." He looked down at the

floor and continued, "For the last few years, I knew that one of us, Voldemort or me, had to die. We both couldn't go on."

"How did you know that, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"That night in the Ministry, the night Sirius died. The Death Eaters were after a prediction that Professor Trelawney had made the night that she was interviewed. Professor Dumbledore heard her. It said that one of us had to kill the other because we both couldn't live on."

The rest were quiet.

"What's more, yesterday just before Professor Snape died he passed on one of his memories to me. I saw it in the pensieve in Professor Dumbledore's office. They were talking about me. What it came down to was that when Voldemort tried to kill me as a baby, he made me his last Horcrux. They thought that I would have to die in order for Voldemort to be destroyed. That's why he had me when he came to the front door of the school. I went into the Forbidden Forest figuring he was going to kill me. But it didn't work. When he hit me with the Killing Curse again, it backfired but differently. I was knocked out and he might have been too. I woke up and just laid there. They thought I was dead and brought me out to show you. You know the rest."

When he looked up he saw that the rest of them were looking at him as if thunderstruck. Mrs. Weasley had one hand over her mouth and the other on her chest as if to hold her heart in. He looked a little sideways and saw Ginny in tears again and Hermione half covering her face behind her hands, her eyes wide in shock. Ginny buried her face on Harry's arm and cried quietly.

"Harry, this goes behind anything we could have imagined," Mr. Weasley said, his voice subdued. "We knew you were carrying around quite a bit these last few years but this is incredible. Why didn't you say something? You could have shared this with us. As for yesterday, we thought that Voldemort had kidnapped you. You willingly went to sacrifice yourself? I can't believe it."

"It's all I could think to do. If you had heard what Snape passed on to me. He was Dumbledore's man to the very end. But it didn't turn out

that way and now it looks like I have a future and that's what I need to talk about. I need your advice. Without my parents or Professor Dumbledore or Sirius, I don't know where else to turn. You've been like my family for quite a while now anyway so...."

It happened so fast that Harry didn't have time to react. Mrs. Weasley swept across the floor and pulled Harry into a fierce embrace. He almost lost his glasses but they were grabbed by George who was now standing to his side as were the rest of them. Ginny and Hermione were also hugging him. Once again it was Mr. Weasley that pulled them back.

"Alright everybody, let's give Harry some breathing room."

Mrs. Weasley gave him one more squeeze and then backed away, a teary smile on her face. After everyone had taken their seats again Harry continued,

"A couple of years ago during my career counseling with Professor McGonagall I told her I thought I wanted to be an Auror. I think that's still a good idea. Just because Voldemort is gone doesn't mean the end of dark magic. But I need NEWTs and that means coming back to school. Do you think they'd let me back in?"

"One way to find out. I'll be right back." This was Bill as he stood and strode to the door. "Dad?"

"Oh, yes, sorry, Bill." Mr. Weasley waved his wand and the door came open.

"Being an Auror is a dangerous job, Harry. But to be honest I don't think I know anyone who would be better qualified. I think the Ministry would be ecstatic at the idea of the famous Harry Potter hunting down dark wizards and witches."

He said the last with a little smile on his face. A moment later the door opened and Professor McGonagall entered, followed by Bill. The acting Headmistress walked to the center of the circle of chairs and looked down at Harry, her face its usual mask of concentration.

“Bill Weasley tells me that you would like to return to Hogwarts for your seventh year, is that correct, Potter?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“With what aim in mind?”

“I want to join the Ministry of Magic as an Auror and I need my NEWTs. I remember you once telling Dolores Umbridge that you’d do whatever it took to make that happen. Can I, Professor, can I come back?”

“Potter, not only can you come back, I’ll write the letter myself and hand it to you before the day is out. We’ll need to discuss a few things, but that can wait.”

She turned to face Hermione and Ron.

“What about you two?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’d like to return,” replied Hermione.

“No, ma’am,” Ron said quietly.

“Why not,” asked the acting Headmistress. His parents looked a bit annoyed.

“I’m going to go to work with George, to help him with Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.”

While his parents didn’t look too happy and Harry was sure there would be a great deal of discussion, George looked very happy.

“As you wish. Ms. Granger, you will have your letter along with Potter. Excuse me; I have many things to attend to.”

She turned and walked toward the door but before she opened it she turned to them with a small smile.

"I think it is safe to say that Professor Dumbledore would be proud of you all, I know I am, especially you, Potter..Harry. Very proud, indeed." Then she opened the door and left.

"Well, Harry, that seems to take care of that. Anything else?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I won't be going back to the Dursleys and I'm not sure I want to spend the summer at the Black house. Do you think that..." he left it hanging.

"It's not a question, Harry dear, you will be coming home to the Burrow with us for as long as you like. I've lost one son, gotten back another who went astray," she smiled at a blushing Percy, "and it looks like I've found another, the first without red hair."

Her smile was a happy one.

"That brings up something else though. I don't think I want to leave Kreacher alone all summer." He heard some snorts of derision from the Weasleys. "No, he's changed a lot. Hermione can tell you. Once we started being nice to him, he really changed. But I need to talk to him. Can you give me a moment?"

He looked up at the ceiling and called out, "Kreacher, I need to speak to you."

With a pop the little house elf was standing in the middle of the circle of chairs. To those that remembered him from the days spent in the Black house he wasn't the same house elf. He no longer slouched; he was clean and wore a clean tea towel. He no longer had the sullen expression nor mumbled.

"Yes, Master Harry, how may Kreacher serve?"

"Well, Kreacher, I need to talk to you. Do you know that Voldemort is dead?"

"Yes, Master. All the magical world has heard of Master Harry's triumph over the dark one."

"Well, as a result I will be returning to Hogwarts this fall but I intend to spend the summer at the Weasleys' house. How will that affect you, Kreacher?"

"A house elf is most comfortable in the house of those he serves, but he must have someone to serve, Master Harry. Kreacher should be where Master Harry wants Kreacher to be."

"Mrs. Weasley? Do you think you'd like to have a house elf to help you at the Burrow?"

"Hmm, he is certainly so much different then I remember. I suppose he could be a help about the place, don't you think, Arthur?"

"If you think so, dear."

"Harry?" Hermione said a lot with that one word.

"I know, Hermione. Kreacher? I need to ask you something else. I'm not really comfortable with you being, well, a slave to me. I'd like you to think about accepting your freedom and working for me for real wages. What do you think?"

"Is a strange idea for a house elf to be thinking about, Master Harry. Kreacher knows Master Harry means well but Kreacher will have to think about it, but think about it Kreacher will and Kreacher will tell Master Harry when Kreacher is done thinking."

"Fair enough, just don't take forever thinking about it. Okay, Hermione?"

"It's a start, Harry." She smiled as she said it.

"Good. Well, that's all I wanted to talk to you about for now, I suppose they'll be plenty of time to talk more over the summer. Thank you all for everything you've done for me. I know I wouldn't have stood a chance without you."

He got another hug from Mrs. Weasley and all the male Weasleys shook his hand. Hermione came up and gave him a hug as well, whispering something in his ear that put a smile on his face. Ginny took his hand in both of hers and looked into his face, studying the now quiet scar, the deep green eyes that still had a bit of fatigue about them. He looked at her and smiled and said,

“Ginny, would you like to go for a walk by the lake? We can talk out there.”

“Of course, Harry.”

“Come back in time for lunch.” Mrs. Weasley said to them as they headed to the door.

“We will, Mum,” replied Ginny.

As Harry held the door open for her, he heard Bill say to his parents,

“It’s unbelievable. Carrying all that around inside him, with all the other nonsense he’s had to put up with these years. It’s just incredible.”

He pulled the door closed before he heard anyone else’s comments. He and Ginny strolled hand in hand down the corridor to the main door and out into the day that held sunshine and warm breezes. They said nothing until they were near the edge of the lake. Harry stopped them and he turned to face Ginny, holding both her hands in his. He was once again amazed at just how beautiful she was. He took in a deep breath and let it out.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever told you but one of the happiest moments of my life was that night that we first kissed in the common room. Most of the others came in the weeks after. I loved you then, Ginny, I hope you know that.”

“I do, and I loved you then too, Harry, I still do. But what about you Harry, what about now?”

“Then is now, I never stopped, Ginny. When I said we had to stop seeing each other after Dumbledore’s funeral it wasn’t because I wanted to. I just didn’t know any other way. I guess I thought it would keep you safe, or at least safer. I guess I was wrong. Everyone was in danger, one way or the other. I’m sorry for what I put you through. I loved you then and I love you now. We’re kind of young and it might be too early to say this but I think I’ll love you forever.” His look was hopeful, questioning.

“We’re not so young, Harry. We’ve been aged a lot the last couple of years. But at least now we have a future to look forward to and yes, I want to spend it with you.”

With that she pulled his arms around her waist and put hers around his neck pulling his lips to hers. It was the first of many, many long lingering kisses they would share. As he pulled her tighter to him Harry had to agree it would be a future to look forward to.

Eventually they pulled apart and began a slow walk along the shoreline of the lake saying very little. Occasionally one would look at the other and when their eyes met they would smile, squeeze their hands a bit tighter and continue on. In various places on the grounds work, sometimes grim, was ongoing to clear away the wrack and ruin from the previous days' battles. At one point they did stop to look at some large tracks and footprints that led up to the water line but neither could figure out what they meant. Turning, they both looked up to the castle, seeing for the first time the totality of the damage to the stately old building. In several places holes had been knocked or blown through the walls. Roofing slates were missing in a number of areas and several windows were completely gone. However, a number of people were working to begin repairs. Even little Professor Flitwick could be seen levitating building stones that had fallen to the ground back up and through their respective holes.

“I guess we all have some rebuilding to do,” Ginny said quietly.

“Yeah, but I think the castle will be the easy part,” Harry replied, looking at her with a sad smile. She responded with a hug and said,

"You're probably right. I think it's time we got back. They'll be serving lunch and Mum will probably get worried if we aren't there."

"Okay," he agreed, but secretly he liked the idea of having someone that would actually worry about whether or not he had eaten lunch. They strolled hand in hand back up the lawn, Harry returning waves, respectful nods and one or two "Well done, Mr. Potter." They entered through the doors and saw more workers attending to the damage that resulted in the final battle. As they entered the Great Hall together, they saw the Weasleys once more occupying the end of the Gryffindor table with one obvious addition. Seated between Bill and Charlie was Fleur, the beautiful French girl that Bill had married just last summer and whom Harry had competed against in the TriWizards Tournament in his fourth year. As they all looked up Fleur caught sight of Harry and gave a small cry and struggled up off the bench. She ran to Harry and threw her arms around him and held on to him, crying into his shoulder. Harry looked down at Bill and the others, his eyes wide with surprise and his arms gently holding on to the slender young woman.

Through her sobs Harry could hear her saying,

"Mon dieu, 'arry, 'ow much more are you supposed to endure. Eet ees all so unfair."

Bill got to his feet and came over to try and comfort his wife as well as extract Harry from her death grip.

"It's all right, dear. Harry is safe and Voldemort is gone. He has his life back for the first time in seventeen years. He's okay."

After a few minutes she brought her head up off of Harry's now much moistened shoulder and look at Bill.

"You do not understand. Yes, 'e 'as defeated the most dangerous wizard anyone can remember. You tell me he weeshes to become an Auror. So every time some new dark witch or wizard comes along, 'oo will they send, 'arry, that's 'oo. Our beautiful 'arry will end up like that crazy Moody, or worse."

This was all said through flowing tears and a number of sniffles. Before Bill could answer Harry spoke,

“Fleur,” he began, his bright green eyes fixed on her. “You have no idea how much this means to me. I know that when we first met, you weren’t all that impressed with me. I seem to recall the words ‘little boy’ somewhere in the discussion.”

Fleur laughed and gave him an embarrassed smile, which under other circumstances might have stopped Harry’s heart but he continued on.

“But hearing you say what you just said, knowing that you’re that worried about me means a lot, a whole lot. But this is something I have to do. The way I’ve grown up, the things I’ve done and had done to me, what else can I do? I can’t let someone else fight this fight while I stay home. I said yesterday in Professor Dumbledore’s office that I’d had enough trouble for a lifetime, but maybe it was just enough to teach me how to do what I feel I have to do. Can you understand that?”

She returned his direct gaze with one of her own. Then with a sigh she leaned forward and planted a kiss on each cheek and slipping a hand around his shoulder she looked at her in-laws and said,

“Theese Lily and James, ‘arry’s parents. They must ‘ave been fabuleux, extraordinary people to ‘ave produced this brave, brave boy. I mean, young man.”

“Yes, Fleur, they were,” Mrs. Weasley replied. “We knew them well and they were the very finest. Now what do you say you let Harry sit down and have some lunch?”

The last was said in her finest ‘mum’ voice and got a laugh from everyone. Fleur gave Harry a last hug, gave one to her sister-in-law Ginny and whispered something in her ear to which Ginny grinned and replied,

“I don’t intend to.”

Harry came around and sat next to Ron and Ginny sat beside him. There were sandwiches and large tureens of soup. Everyone reached in for sandwiches while Mrs. Weasley ladled out soup for her 'family'. As they ate Harry couldn't help but look at them all. After all these years he had finally found a family. Not one of blood, but more importantly one of love. He couldn't help but smile, the biggest smile in a long time.

"What's with all the teeth, Harry?" asked George.

"Oh, I guess I'm just starting to feel better about things. It's all been so horrible for so long, maybe there's some light at the end of the tunnel."

But looking at George he thought about Fred and the smile dropped off his face in an instant.

"Harry, what's wrong?" asked Charlie. "You've gone pale."

Everyone turned to look at him.

"I'm sorry. I'm smiling like an idiot and Fred is, is..."

"Harry, dear, you've got to stop punishing yourself. It wasn't your fault and the last person in the world that would want you to be so unhappy would be Fred. We'll all miss him but we will always remember him with love and pride. It's okay to smile Harry, heaven knows you need to more than most."

"Yes, ma'am."

He felt Ginny give his hand a squeeze and lean into him. Ron leaned over to whisper in his ear but loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Lighten up, mate. Otherwise Fred is likely to come back and haunt you and if you thought Peeves was bad, imagine Fred walking through walls and popping out of suits of armor."

Even Harry had to laugh at that image. They resumed eating and Harry had a thought. He leaned over and asked Ginny what she had meant when she said 'I don't intend to'.

"Oh," she whispered back. "Fleur said to make sure that I didn't let you slip away."

Harry got back his big smile. It was a few moments later when they were interrupted by a sharp rapping from the direction of the head table. Professor McGonagall was standing at the podium. She looked tired and worn, but very resolute.

"If I could have your attention please."

She waited a few moments until everyone was quiet.

"The last twenty four hours have been, to say the least, rather extraordinary. A great victory has been won but at a very great cost. I know that all those who have lost friends and family members are in the thoughts and prayers of all those in the wizarding world. Well, the ones that matter anyway. I have word from Acting Minister Shacklebolt that many of the fugitives have already been apprehended and a number of Ministry employees have been taken in for questioning. He wants me to tell you that Hogwarts has the full support of the Ministry and he will do what he can to help get us back on our feet. While I appreciate the Minister's thoughts, I am sure that we can put Hogwarts in order without the Ministry's help. They have more than enough to deal with."

There was a smattering of applause and 'here, heres'. She cleared her throat and adjusted her glasses.

"We, the wizarding world, owe so much to those who have labored long and hard against the forces of evil that invaded here yesterday. Many did what they could, some did so much and one did perhaps the most of all."

She looked down in Harry's direction and he could feel his neck and ears go red as many others looked around at him. Ron gave him a

gentle nudge in the ribs as Ginny once more squeezed his knee. Hermione reached around Ron and squeezed his shoulder. The other's smiled at him, Fleur through a fresh bout of tears.

"There will be a time, I am sure, for accolades and honors. But our immediate attention is for all those who have fallen. After much discussion with those who are affected it has been decided that a single site will be used as their final resting place.

"Even as we speak, the house known as the Shrieking Shack is being demolished and the grounds will be turned into a cemetery and memorial park. For those of you who did not know, the Shack was never haunted. That was simply a device to disguise its true use as a sanctuary for a student who had special needs and who now as a man will rest there forever. I am speaking of Professor Remus Lupin. The internment ceremony will be held two days from now at nine o'clock in the morning. I hope as many of you as possible will attend."

There was a great deal of murmured conversation at this point and the Professor let it go on for a few moments. Then she cleared her throat once more and continued,

"On a somewhat happier note there are a few announcements I would like to make regarding staffing and students for the coming year. Yes, we will be opening as usual come September first."

This was greeted with thunderous applause and cheering. The Professor held up her hands to ask for quiet. When the noise subsided she continued.

"Once again, we find ourselves short a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Fortunately, I have been able to arrange for the services, for the coming year at least, of a most capable wizard and one of the best students I have had the privilege to teach. Professor Bill Weasley, would you please stand up?"

With a crooked smile, Bill stood up and acknowledged the enthusiastic response to the announcement. The other Weasley brothers were on their feet laughing and slapping Bill on the back. Fleur's face was alight with pride as were his parents. Harry sat

dumbfounded at first but then he too stood and clapped. Once more Professor McGonagall waved for quiet.

“It is also a pleasure to announce that two students who left us before the start of term last year to do extensive research in the field have been accepted to return and complete their education. I am speaking of Miss Hermione Granger.” Her face went bright red at the applause. “And of course, Mr. Harry Potter.”

At which point the roof nearly came off the Great Hall. A number of the surviving members of Dumbledore’s Army came rushing over to shake his hand, slap his back and not a few hugs and kisses from the girls. Harry looked down to see Ginny smiling back up at him, secure in the knowledge that they were together. This time it took repeated raps with her gavel to get the crowd to quiet down again.

“Professor Weasley, I believe this would be an appropriate time to make any announcements you might have. Oh yes, and Mrs. Weasley, we will not be requiring the Professor to cut his hair.” Mrs. Weasley glared up at her son as everyone laughed and eventually she did too.

“Thank you, Headmistress. It may have occurred to some that Defense Against the Dark Arts won’t be very important in the years to come. I couldn’t disagree more. The Dark Arts are not gone; just it’s most dangerous and twisted practitioner. There will always be those who succumb to the allure of the Dark ways. I don’t say this to scare you but to alert you to the fact that we must be ready so the next time someone tries to impose their will on us we can stop them. With that in mind I would like to announce a special appointment, that is my assistant, who will help me teach, particularly the first years and share with all the students his unique insights and experience that have been gained at great risk to himself.” Bill turned and looked down at Harry, who had regained his seat on the bench. “What do you say Harry, will you help me, help us all?”

Once more Harry was dumbfounded. Everyone around him was shouting congratulations and encouragement. The DA members who remained standing behind Harry were chanting “Harry, Harry, Harry”.

Harry looked up at Bill and gave him a couple of nods, the best he could manage.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Bill said as he turned towards the front of the Hall.

“I’ve got my assistant, Professor McGonagall.”

“Excellent. Harry, Hermione would you come up and get your letters? And Mr. Ron Weasley, are you sure you won’t change your mind? You would be most welcome.”

Ron laughed and shouted back over the noise.

“No thanks, Professor. George and I plan on getting filthy rich.”

Everyone laughed including Mrs. Weasley. So Harry and Hermione walked up to the podium acknowledging waves from friends, schoolmates and total strangers. When they reached the podium Professor McGonagall handed them each the familiar envelope with the Hogwarts emblem and seal.

“When you open these you will find only your letter. I will need to speak to both of you about your course work so you will know what materials and books you will need. We haven’t yet worked it all out.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they replied in unison, smiling widely.

In a lower voice she added,

“It would only be fair and appropriate if I were to appoint you two Head Boy and Girl, but for several reasons I don’t believe it would be wise. The first is that I think you’ve done enough already. The second is you should be allowed to concentrate on your studies since you’ve been away for a year and you, Potter, will have the added responsibilities of your teaching assistant post. As for you Ms. Granger, I wish to have a long talk with you about your future. So that’s enough for now, let’s get through these next few difficult days and then I will send word for our meetings. I’m very pleased you’ll be

back with us. Oh, and Potter, what are your plans concerning the Quidditch team?"

"I'm not sure, Professor. I really need to concentrate on my studies. I'd love to play again, though. Hermione? Can you help me figure out how to set up a schedule for studying and all those things you do for your courses. I don't know anyone who knows more about that stuff than you do."

"Of course, Harry, I'd be happy to help," she said enthusiastically. "I have tried to help in the past you know." The last was said with an impish grin.

"I know you have and maybe now that I don't have to worry about someone trying to kill me all the time, I can take advantage of it."

He said this with a smile but there was something in his tone that brought a lump to Hermione's throat and she laid her hand on Harry's arm and gave him another little smile.

"Right then," the Professor broke in. "We have you two settled. Let's see what we can do with the rest of the old place." She looked up back to the crowd.

"Well, everyone. I believe that's all for now. May I have all the teaching staff meet me in my classroom in thirty minutes? You're excused from this meeting, Potter. Those of you who have volunteered for the memorial park work, please make your way to the Shrieking Shack, or the grounds at least, as quickly as you can. Students, please stay put for a moment, your heads of house will have assignments for you for helping set things to rights here in the castle and on the grounds. And Hagrid, please see me right away. I will see you all, hopefully, at nine o'clock, day after tomorrow for the service. Thank you all."

The crowd gave the Professor a great cheer and round of applause as she left the podium. It was clear they were happy to see a firm and orderly hand in charge once more. More than one person assumed she would be the new Headmistress in short order. Harry and Hermione made their way back to the Weasleys and after some

hurried conversation, Bill started toward the faculty and staff meeting, Charlie, George and Ron were going down to help with the memorial park, Percy and Mr. Weasley felt they needed to go to the Ministry to help with matters there. Harry and Hermione thought they should go with the work crew but Mrs. Weasley told them to remain behind for a while at least. Students were divided up into groups and soon were going off on this task or that to try and restore order to the school. Hagrid stumped off soon after having spoken with the Professor. Soon it was just Harry, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley and Fleur sitting at the table.

“Well, first I thought we’d talk about this summer. Harry, dear, after the ceremony, I would like you and I to go to the London house, get whatever things you may have left there and then get you settled in at the Burrow. Hermione, I don’t know what plans you have for the summer, but you are welcome to visit at anytime for as long as you might like.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley, but first I have to get my parents back from Australia. I suppose I could fly there by plane but that could get expensive. I used a lot of our savings to send them there and set them up.”

“Don’t worry, Hermione. Make the arrangements and I’ll have Gringot’s transfer the money out of my vault.”

“Oh, Harry, that’s so generous, but I can’t ask...”

Harry cut her off.

“You’re not asking, I’m offering, and quite frankly I’m not in the mood to take no for an answer. There is a lot of be set right and with what my parents left me and Sirius’ on top of it, I’ve got more then I’ll ever need. So no arguments and the sooner the better.”

Hermione and Fleur were both visibly shocked by the force and tone in Harry’s voice. Mrs. Weasley’s eyes were narrowed as she looked intently at Harry. Then she spoke,

“Yes, Hermione, I think it would be a good idea for you to do just that. I suppose you know where you need to go and who to talk to and make the arrangements?”

“Yes, Mrs Weasley. I’ll need to call the same travel agent we always use for trips and things. I’ll just go down to the village and Apparate home from there.”

“Good. Fleur, why don’t you go along with Hermione. I’d feel better if she had someone along with her while she makes her plans.” Her facial expression said much.

“Of course, Mother Weasley. I’d be ‘appy to go with ‘ermione.”

“Wonderful, and dear, I’ve told you, ‘mum’ will do nicely,” she smile.

“Yes, Muum,” Fleur laughed. “Come, ‘ermione. Let’s be on our way.”

“Okay, Fleur. Harry? You’ll be okay?”

“Sure, Hermione. I’m fine, just kinda tired. I’ll be even better once I know your folks are safe and home.”

Hermione gave a little smile and then hugged Harry tightly. She and Fleur left the Hall, leaving just Harry and Mrs. Weasley alone at the table. A small group of students, first and second years by the look of them were busy with cloths, brooms and such trying to put a shine on the tables, benches and floors in the hall.

“Harry, dear, I think you and I should take a walk.”

“But there’s so much to do, shouldn’t I be helping with something?” Harry asked.

“Harry, I won’t offend you by telling you you’ve done enough already. Let’s just say that with everything that has gone on, you might prove to be too much of a distraction to people and it might slow things down.”

“Oh, the ‘Famous Harry Potter’ thing, you mean.”

“Yes, dear, I’m afraid so,” she said with a warm smile.

“Okay, let’s go.”

As they walked out of the hall, through the corridor and out the main doors Harry couldn’t help but notice that everyone they passed stopped what they were doing and watched him go by. A few were students that he knew and they would say ‘hi’ and he would reply but mostly it was just a quiet observation. For many years after there would be more than a few people who would say,

“Yes, I was there. I saw him walk out of the castle the morning after he overthrew You-know-who, no I still can’t say his name. He looked so tired, so somber.”

So Harry and Mrs. Weasley walked without talking for a while until they came to a bench that overlooked the lake.

“Why don’t we sit, dear? I’d like to talk with you for a little while.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Weasley.”

They sat down on the bench and for a few moments they just looked out over the lake, the large tracks he and Ginny had seen were still evident and still a mystery. Mrs. Weasley finally broke the silence.

“Harry, dear, I don’t know how to say this so I’ll just come right out with it. I am extremely worried about you.”

“Why?” Harry asked, genuinely surprised. “For the first time in seventeen years someone isn’t out to kill me. I’m coming back to finish school and I might even get to play Quidditch again. Ginny and I are, well, back together. For the first time in a long time I feel like I have a future, what’s there to worry about?”

“Those are all external things, Harry. I’m worried about what’s going on in here and here.”

She pointed first to Harry’s head and then his heart.

He stared at her for a moment and then looked back out at the lake and said nothing.

“Harry, look at me.”

As he turned his head to face her, she locked his brilliant green eyes with her own.

“You have had to do and endure so much in your young life, especially these last seven years, then whole groups of adults have in their entire lives. You’ve seen so much, lost so much, had to do so much, most people would be crushed under the weight. Yet you remain so quiet, so resolute, you let so little emotion show. I’ve known you since you started out at Hogwarts and every year I’ve seen you hurt a little more. Accused of being the Heir of Slytherin, accused of crashing the Triwizard Tournament, of lying about Voldemort’s return, being ridiculed in the paper. And each time you’ve come out on top, the truth is told but not before more hurt is done. I’ve watched you Harry, yes I have. And not just at the Burrow, I’m not ashamed to say that I’ve had my spies watching you.”

At this admission Harry’s eyes widened. He had brief wild thoughts about being betrayed by his friends.

“No, Harry, not like that. But with all my children around you so much I would always ask how you were doing, were you sleeping enough, eating enough, were you worried about things, like that. Ron and Ginny tended to be very closed mouth about it. Ron said he wasn’t going to inform on his best mate and Ginny has been very protective of you. One time she got very angry after I asked them a lot of questions about you after they came home at end of term and she said, ‘Mum, lay off Harry, I’m keeping an eye on him.’

“The point to all of this Harry is you can’t keep this all bottled up inside. You’ve taken on so much responsibility and I’m sure you’re feeling guilty about what’s happened. That’s all rubbish, like Arthur said this morning. You are as much a victim as anyone who died yesterday and the day before and all the days since Tom Riddle

decided to become Lord Voldemort. Grief is okay, Harry, we're all grieving right now, but no guilt, not now, not ever."

As she spoke his eyes began to mist over, then fill up and soon the tears were coursing down his cheeks and then Mrs. Weasley pulled his head down onto her shoulder and held him as she would one of her own children, which as far as she was concerned, he was. His shoulders shook as the dam he had built inside all those months ago finally collapsed and he let himself go. The loss of his parents, their surrogates in Sirius and Dumbledore, Lupin and Tonks, his friends and schoolmates, the loss of a child's happiness at the hands of the Dursleys all came flooding out. Mrs. Weasley said nothing, letting the warmth of her embrace and the love that it represented say what Harry needed to hear. It was some minutes until the shaking had subsided and he finally lifted his head and looked at her. His face was red and tear stained but his eyes were bright and he smiled a little.

"Now that's the ticket, Harry. You have such a nice smile; you should use it more often."

"I think I will. It'll be easier now that I've found my mum again."

Now it was her turn to have her eyes well up and the tears to flow but for her it was happiness. It was joy at the knowledge that the famous orphan was one no longer, in spirit if not in fact. She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her eyes and cheeks.

"Dear me, we must look a fright. Why don't we go inside and clean up."

"Ok, Mrs. Weasley, whatever you say."

They strolled up the lawn toward the castle, arm in arm, their mood considerably lighter than when they had left it. That mood was darkened when they were confronted by an unpleasant sight at the bottom of the staircase leading up to the castle doors. It was none other than Rita Skeeter, the most yellow of journalists in the wizarding world.

“Harry, darling!” she exclaimed. “The wizard of the hour or perhaps the century, I daresay. What a story and as I’m somewhat your biographer I thought...”

She was cut off with a burst of laughter from Harry. Mrs. Weasley was ready to shout Rita down but didn’t get the chance.

“Who are you kidding?” Harry said scornfully. “The only thing that got you to write the truth about me was the threat of Azkaban. It worked once so it should work again. If you ever so much as look at me or anyone close to me again, I’ll make sure the right people in the Ministry know your little secret. And these days the Ministry is a lot more likely to believe what I have to say. Now get away from me.”

With that he led Mrs. Weasley up the stairs, leaving a gaping Rita standing at the bottom of the stairway.

“Well done, Harry, but exactly what were you talking about?”

“I guess it’s safe to tell you. Back near the end of the Triwizard Tournament, Hermione figured out that Rita was an unregistered Animagus. She can turn into some kind of beetle. That’s how she was able to snoop around and write all that trash. Hermione blackmailed her into writing that story for Luna Lovegood’s dad.”

It was Mrs. Weasley’s turn to laugh.

“Well, well, well. You two will never cease to amaze me. Your secret is safe with me, Harry.”

They parted company in the corridor to find the nearest washrooms so they could clean up. She made Harry promise to meet them in the hall for dinner. He gladly did so. It would be nice to have a ‘family’ dinner. He took to strolling the corridors for the first time in a year. It was comforting to be surrounded by the familiar sights. More than once someone would call to him from this painting or that and he would smile and wave back. He could hear the sounds of people working to clean this mess or repair that damage. More than ever before he felt this was the place he belonged and now the world was

a place he liked being in. He was pulled out of himself when he heard a familiar voice call his name. It was Neville.

“Harry, Harry, I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Hullo, Neville, what’s up?”

“Can you come with me, please; I want you to see something.”

“Sure, Neville.”

He didn’t say so, because it would likely embarrass his friend but Harry felt he owed Neville a huge debt and he wasn’t about to say ‘no’ to just about anything he asked. Neville led him to one of the classrooms on the fifth floor. It was quiet here since little had occurred that needed fixing. As he walked through the door he saw a crowd of familiar faces. Dumbledore’s Army stood there awaiting him. They were all smiling, a few waved but they remained silent. Neville came to stand next to him.

“We wanted a chance to see you alone, Harry, just like when we started. I thought you had enough cheering downstairs and besides we didn’t want to attract attention.”

“Thanks, Nev. This is great. You guys are great. No matter what I do in my life, I think the DA is going to always be the thing I’m proudest of.”

They all moved forward and there were many handshakes and embraces and one great big kiss from Ginny. This got a few cheers and when they pulled apart a little Harry kept one arm around her shoulder as he looked at Neville.

“Nev, thank you. You really saved the day, and me, yesterday. I may be the boy who didn’t die and the guy who destroyed Voldemort but you were the one who saved me and made it all possible. I’m proud you’re my friend.”

“Thanks, Harry. We couldn’t have done it without you though, Mate.”

“What’re you talking about, Neville? You kept the DA going all this past year.” Harry looked at the others. “You all kept it going with everything they tried to do to stop it. Ginny was telling me about it this morning. You guys were great.”

“That’s not what I meant, Harry. I mean from the beginning. It was tough being you. But you stayed with it. No matter what. This whole past year, we kept telling each other you wouldn’t quit so we wouldn’t either.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. He looked down at Ginny who was smiling and with pride in her eyes. He looked at all the familiar faces who were grinning fit to burst. He then looked at Neville who was looking at Harry with a shy smile. Neville turned around and picked up a long package from a desk.

“Here Harry, I figure this should go to you. You used it to save Ginny that time. We all thought you’d know what to do with it now.”

Harry took it and pulled back some of the paper. He saw the hilt of Gryffindor’s sword. He shrugged and shook his head.

“No, Nev, it’s not mine to decide about. It came to you this time. You do with it what you think is best.”

He handed it back to Neville, who smiled again and set it down on the desk. They spent the rest of the afternoon swapping stories about what had been going on at the school and what Harry, Ron and Hermione had been up to. Harry chose not to talk about Ron’s absence. That was a personal matter between those three alone. When it was time for dinner they left the room and trooped down to the Great Hall together. Harry was feeling better than he had all day. His mood was buoyed by the stories of how they resisted and subverted the attempts to turn the school into a haven for the Dark Arts and purebloods. He voiced his objections whenever they tried to give him the credit but inwardly he drew more than a little satisfaction from the fact that his teaching of the DA had such a positive effect. He faced the idea of being Bill’s assistant with a little more confidence.

Dinner was not a joyous event but the shock and horror of the day before was lifting and with signs that the school was returning to a modest measure of normality, the mood was lighter. Harry was once again seated with the Weasleys and he was listening as Bill was discussing what went on in the school staff meeting.

“As I was saying, Harry, Professor McGonagall is very impressed by what she’s found out about the DA. She had hints after it was discovered last year but apparently she had a little talk with Neville and a few of the other older members and it gave her the idea about you helping me. You better be careful. If you do as good a job with the first years she’s liable not to want you to leave for Auror training.” Bill laughed.

“Do not laugh, ‘usband. It would be best if ‘arry stayed ‘ere and became a Professor and not running around ‘unting Dark ones,” Fleur said with undisguised anger.

“Come on, Fleur,” Charlie Weasley said. “With his reputation and a few years of Auror training, there won’t be a dark witch or wizard that would dare stand up to him. Besides I think he’s earned the right to make his own decisions about his life.”

Fleur didn’t respond but it was obvious she was still upset. Bill could only look at Harry and shrug. That and the look on his face spoke loudly that he had no idea why his wife felt so strongly. Considering their history Harry wasn’t sure. They certainly parted on good terms at the end of the Tournament and she was always pleasant when they met the few times when she and Bill were dating, but that didn’t explain all this. The rest of the dinner passed with nothing else of any significance.

There were no further announcements. An owl did arrive to tell them that Mr. Weasley and Percy would be staying at the Ministry overnight. There was much work to be done dealing with Voldemort’s allies and the disruption caused by their disappearances or arrests. They promised nothing would keep them from the memorial service.

After dinner everyone went off to find their beds either in the dormitories or in makeshift accommodations that had been set up in

the school or in the village. This night Harry, the Weasleys and Fleur sat up for a while in the common room. Hermione was at her home making ready to leave for Australia. She would come back to Hogwarts for the memorial service then go back to London to begin the long flight that afternoon. She hoped to be back within the week.

Slowly people began to make their way to their rooms for the night. After a while all who remained were Harry, Ron, Bill and Fleur. Ron made to get up and Bill stood with him, offering his hand to help his wife up.

"Um, Bill, Fleur," Harry began. "Would it be alright if I talked to Fleur alone for a bit?"

Bill looked from Harry to Fleur and back. He nodded his agreement.

"Of course, 'arry."

Bill followed Ron up the stairs to the boys' dormitory. Ron looked back over his shoulder at Harry and gave him a lopsided grin. Harry smiled back. When he heard the doors close he turned and looked at Fleur who was looking at him with a questioning tilt to her head.

"So, 'arry, what do you weesh to discuss weeth me? Are you going to try and convince me of your plans?" Her voice was level, her tone neutral.

"No. But I would like to try and understand why you feel so strongly about this. Even Mrs. Weasley, who worries about everything I do, hasn't objected to it. She even said that with my tendency to attract trouble at least this way I'll be trained to handle it. Why do you care so much?"

"'arry, you are like family to me now. That means very much to me."

While her face didn't give it away, her voice sounded a bit evasive. Harry looked back at her, his expression clearly showing he wasn't convinced. Fleur stared back for a moment, then looked down into her lap, her hands held tightly together. She looked back up at Harry again.

"I 'ave a confession to make 'arry. I 'ave felt very guilty these last few years. When we first met after you 'ad been chosen the fourth champion, I thought many bad things about you. I believed all those theengs they said about you. That you were arrogant, always wanting to be the center of attention. Even after I saw you fly so magnificently against that dragon I thought no better about you. That I was shown up by a leetle boy, as I called you, was very 'umiliating. Then you saved my leetle sister when you could have won that event. Eet made me ashamed. But I thought we parted on good terms at the end of that year and all was well."

"We did, Fleur."

"Oh, 'arry. I still felt so bad. The more I came to know about you the worse I felt. My seester adores you, you know. Always talking about 'ow brave you are. She tried to find out all she could about you and she would tell me what she learned. Then when I came back to work at Gringott's I found out so much more from Bill and his family. All that you've done, all that you 'ad suffered. Keeping that 'orrible creature at bay all those years and then when 'e returned you told us and 'ardly anyone believed you. But you never stopped, you didn't give up. And een the end you were willing to die to see Voldemort destroyed. Who was I to be so proud, so arrogant to treat you so badly? Eet shames me still."

The last was said amid choking sobs, tears streaming down her face. Harry wasn't sure what to do next but he couldn't let this go on. Not if things turned out the way he hoped and he and Fleur would be seeing a lot of each other. He reached across and took her hand.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, Fleur," he began and she started to shake her head. He squeezed her hand a bit and looked directly into her eyes.

"No, there isn't. When we first met all you saw was a scrawny little fourth year that didn't belong where he was. You didn't know anything about me or what was going on. You saw how other people were reacting, why should a stranger from another country know any different? But most of all you did change how you felt when you found

out more. You should have seen the looks I got when you kissed me on the cheeks when you left to go home. We're going to be friends, Fleur, we're practically family as it is. You need to stop beating yourself up about this. It's over. Please."

Fleur looked back at those bright green eyes, pleading with her to let go of her guilt and she marveled at the idea of what kind of man he would grow into. She took his hand into both of hers and with a little laugh said,

"You are right, 'arry. Eet ees a bit seely when I think about eet. Maybe eet bothers me so much because eet proves I'm not so perfect like I used to theenk I was."

"I don't know, Fleur. You seem perfect to me," he said with a smile.

"Oh, 'arry," she laughed again and she put her arms around him and hugged him tight.

"Wait until I write and tell my seester I am 'arry Potter's good friend. She weell be so jealous."

She gave him a final squeeze and then leaned back away from him.

"Okay, mon ami. Off to bed weeth you, I 'ave kept you up far too long."

"G'night, Fleur."

"Good night, 'arry."

"Oh, Fleur, did I ever tell you how much I love to hear the way you say my name." He smiled and gave her a little wink.

"Bad boy, to bed with you." She laughed and with a toss of her shimmering hair, she went quickly up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

Harry could not help grinning as he walked up to his room. Things were falling into place and he looked forward to the future. He

crawled into bed and lay staring up at the ceiling for a while, listening to the heavy breathing of Ron and Neville.

He wasn't sure when he fell asleep but before long he found himself laying on the ground back in the woods being picked up by Hagrid to be carried to the front of Hogwarts like a trophy to be displayed. There was Neville defying Voldemort and behind him the defenders of the school. But the sword never came and before Harry could act, Voldemort blasted Neville to nothingness and the Death Eaters and their allies rushed the door and out of the village of Hogsmeade came not the townspeople and returning students but a wave of foul creatures of Dark magic and they began blasting the school with powerful curses and Harry jumped up shouting for it to stop, that he was dead and it didn't have to go on.

He was screaming at the top of his voice and then he fell and he awoke lying on the floor tangled in his bed curtains. Ron and Neville were shouting, 'Wake up, Harry, it's a dream.' He continued to struggle but as he came to his senses he stopped trying to fight them and as they began to make some head way getting him unraveled the door banged open and Bill and Charlie and George boiled in.

Ginny and Fleur could be heard calling up to them from the common room as other voices could be heard with questions about what was going on. They finally got Harry free of the curtains and up on his feet, although he was none too steady. His eyes were glazed and his vision was blurry.

"Good grief, Harry. You're white as a sheet and soaked with sweat. What was it?"

"I was dead again, but I wasn't. Like before, but Neville never got the sword and Voldemort blasted him into nothing." Harry tried to focus on his friend but instead had to reach out and touch his face to convince himself he was there.

"Then they attacked the school and all these dark magic creatures came up out of the town. They must have gotten everyone in the village first. They were blowing the castle to pieces. I tried to stop

them, tell them I was already dead but they wouldn't listen, no matter how loud I shouted."

He swayed despite the grip Ron and Neville had on him.

"C'mon," Bill began. "We've got to get him up to Madame Pomfrey. He's really out of it. Someone run up to the hospital wing and tell them we're bringing Harry up there." Turning back to Ron and Neville he said, "See if he can walk, otherwise we'll carry him up."

They got two steps before Harry's eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped. If they hadn't been holding him he would have been face down on the floor. Bill and Charlie stepped in and scooped him up from either side and went out through the door sideways and then down the sweeping stairs. Ginny and Fleur looked horrified and the other Gryffindors weren't much better. As the elder Weasley brothers carried Harry's inert form towards the exit hole Charlie called back over his shoulder,

"George, go find Mum and get her there."

"Right."

Bill took Harry as Charlie climbed out of the portal, then passed him through and came out himself. Ginny and Fleur tumbled out behind them as did Neville and Ron. George came last and sprinted off towards the room his mother was sharing with some of the other moms who were staying. They proceeded quickly through the corridors and to the hospital wing. Madame Pomfrey stood at the door to the ward, anxiety plain on her face but maintaining her composure.

"Right here in this bed, boys. Gently now. Let me see."

She pulled back his eyelids and clucked her tongue. She felt his pulse and listened to his shallow breathing. His pale face and his sweat soaked hair plastered to his forehead told her volumes. She mumbled under her breath.

“Alright, clear out all of you please. I have many other injured people here who need their rest. You can do no more for him tonight. Yes, I know you are all concerned but that means nothing right now, he’s a very sick young man and he needs his rest. Yes you can wait outside if you must.”

She shoos them out into the waiting room where they all took seats. Fleur was holding on to Bill’s arm so tightly he was wincing. Ginny hopped up and began pacing, chewing at her lower lip. When George came in with Mrs. Weasley Ginny flung herself into her mother’s arms and cried.

“What is going on here? Poppy? What is it?”

“I’m so angry at myself right now, Molly. That boy has been through so much this last year and who knows what that last spell You-Know-who hit him with may have done. And here he is waltzing around the grounds, up late. I should have had him in here from the very start but with all the injured I just didn’t think. Stupid.”

“Calm down, Poppy. We’ve all been around him much more today than you and we didn’t notice anything more than a little fatigue and a bit of moodiness. How could you know? But how is he?”

“I’d say shock, exhaustion, who knows what emotional trauma. I’m sending an owl right now to St. Mungo’s and asking for someone to come out here. I’m not taking any chances.”

“Can I see him, Poppy? Just for a moment?”

“All right, but for a moment and quietly. No, just your mum, all of you.”

Mrs. Weasley slipped through the door and walked quietly up to Harry’s bedside. She looked down at his face, pale in the moonlight that came through the large window at the end of the ward. Why hadn’t she noticed how thin he looked, how worn, she berated herself.

“I’m sorry, Lily, James.”

She touched his face, it felt clammy. She smoothed his hair away from his face and then with a sigh she left the room. Her children and the others looked up, every one a mask of anxiety. She looked back at them with a small smile.

“We’ve all gotten used to him coming out of such horrible scrapes we just didn’t pay attention. He’s pushed himself to the limit this time and he needs rest. I know it’s a waste of time for me to tell you to go back to bed, so I won’t, since I’ll wait here with you. Ron, please, go tell the Gryffindors that Harry is staying here tonight, then you can come back.” She then settled herself down on a bench with Ginny at her side. “And now we wait.”

It was nearly sunrise when a small wizard in white doctor’s robes bustled into the room. He carried a small bag and his wand. He didn’t even stop to acknowledge those waiting in the outer room. They heard a greeting from Madame Pomfrey before the door closed. They waited some more. It was perhaps an hour and a half later when the little man came out again, followed by Madame Pomfrey. He came to stand before Mrs. Weasley.

“I am given to understand that you are close to the boy?”

“We consider him family, yes.”

“Well, ma’am, you have a very sick young fellow on your hands. Physically he is on the verge of complete collapse. I can’t be certain but whatever happened when he was struck with that last curse by You-know-who, yes, yes, it’s silly but old habits, you know. Anyway, it took a great deal out of him. On top of that, he has been through a great deal of stress in his young life. That can be enormously damaging over time. I’ve ordered complete bed rest for the next several days, then he must be allowed to recover at a controlled pace that I will lay out and supervise. I will return in three days to see how he is coming along. You are his friends and family, you must see that he does not tax himself in any manner. He could damage himself permanently. And under no circumstances is he allowed to perform any magic. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Doctor. Thank you very, very much.”

“While I am here, Poppy, would you like me to look at any of your other patients?”

“Why yes, thank you. That would be very helpful.”

They both disappeared back into the ward room. Those in the waiting room looked around at each other. Molly Weasley looked at her sons. They all looked grim and a bit shocked. Fleur was as pale as her hair, wringing her hands in her lap. Ginny was quiet but had a strange, almost determined look on her face.

“Well, you heard what the doctor said. We are going to have to do everything we can to help Harry along. Fleur, when you’ve had a chance to pull yourself together I think you should go along to Hermione as planned. Yes, let her know what has happened but she needs to finish her preparations. She can be here tonight and there isn’t anything she, or we, can do in the meantime.”

“Mum,” Ron started. “Harry is going to be very upset if he misses the funeral tomorrow, you know that.”

“Ron, there’s no help for it. We don’t even know if he’ll be awake by then, and if he is he’ll be in no condition to get out of bed, let alone be out there. Now look, I know how you all feel about Harry, I feel the same way, but it’s not about us, it’s about him. Now, I want you all to go down to breakfast, No, don’t argue. Go down there and eat, you can bring something up to me when you’re done. Off you go.”

As her family, along with Neville, trudged out of the waiting room, Mrs. Weasley settled in. With nothing else to do she began to tic off a list in her mind about what they would have to do to get Harry well. She wished her husband would return soon. They had much to discuss. Perhaps an hour later, about mid morning, the doctor emerged with Madame Pomfrey.

“Thank you so much, Doctor, you’ve been a great deal of help.”

“Not at all, Poppy, we do what we can. Extraordinary times. Remember, tell those two that they should come see me at St.

Mungo's as soon as they are up and about. The rest should be fine." He turned to Mrs. Weasley. "I've checked on Harry one last time, he seems to be resting a bit easier, but he has a long way to go."

"Yes, Doctor, thank you so much."

"You're all very welcome. I'll see you in three days."

With that the little wizard left the room. Mrs. Weasley looked back at Madame Pomfrey.

"The doctor said it would be all right if you wanted to come in and sit with him for a bit, Molly."

"Thank you, Poppy. I'm grateful."

She followed the nurse back into the ward room. She saw that they had put up a screen around his bed on one side and the bottom. She saw a chair had been placed next to the open side. She sat down and looked at Harry's face. It did seem that a bit more color was there and his breathing did seem stronger. She settled back in the chair and watched. She could hear Madame Pomfrey moving about the other beds, talking in low whispers. The other patients seemed aware that something odd was going on and there was very little talking. Perhaps an hour or so into her vigil, she saw Harry stir a bit and as she leaned forward she heard him mumble, "Mum?"

"No, Harry, dear. It's Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, same thing, really."

He settled back into the bed and there was a small smile on his face. Mrs. Weasley blinked back tears as she leaned around the screen and caught the nurse's eye with a wave. When Madame Pomfrey came around the curtain, Mrs. Weasley looked up and said,

"Poppy, he moved a little and spoke a bit, then he got quiet again."

"That's a good sign, I'd say. I hear someone out in the waiting room. Perhaps it's your family with your breakfast, you need to eat too."

“Yes, I’ll go and see.”

Molly got up and went out to find everyone but Neville in the room, a covered plate and basket and a pot of tea. They all looked a bit harried.

“Here you go, Mum. Some bacon and eggs, rolls, butter, tea. You should have seen what the house elves tried to push on us. Delivered it by hand,” Bill said as they set her food down on the bench. “What a madhouse. We almost got bowled over by everyone rushing at us to find out what happened. Professor McGonagall almost broke the podium trying to quiet everyone down. She said she’d find out how Harry was and let them know at lunch. How is he?”

“He’s resting easier. His color is a bit better and his breathing is stronger. He even spoke a bit but I’m not sure if he was awake or not.”

“What did he say, Mum?” Ginny asked.

“He said ‘mum’ as a question.”

Fleur choked back a sob as Ginny took her hand.

“That was it?”

“No, when I said, no it was me he replied, ‘oh, same thing, really’”.

“He’s got that right,” Ron said.

“Yes, well. It’s a good sign but he has a long road ahead of him. I think we should all go and try and get some rest, we’ll do him no good if we make ourselves sick and tomorrow is likely to be a trying day.”

“Mum, before we go, could I...?” Ginny asked, her voice shaking a bit.

“I don’t know, Ginny.”

“Please, Mum?”

“Well, I guess it would be all right for just a minute. But you must be quiet and just for a minute.”

She took her daughter's hand and led her into the ward. Madame Pomfrey looked up from one of her patients and after a moment nodded slightly. Ginny walked over and stood next to Harry's bed side. She reached down and took his hand. It felt warm which was good, but it seemed so frail. Harry was never and likely would never be a large person but he seemed somehow shrunken. Still holding his hand she knelt down and leaned close to his ear. Some of her long red hair touched his face. She began to whisper softly and Mrs. Weasley wasn't sure but she thought Harry smiled a bit. A moment more and then Ginny stood up, kissed his hand and set it back down on the bed. As she turned to leave she looked at her mother and said,

“I'm not going to lose him, not now, not after all this.”

Her face was set with a fierce determination. Her mother only smiled and nodded. They turned and left the ward room. The others were all standing waiting for them. Ginny looked at them and said,

“He'll be fine; he's been through tough times before. He'll get through this, we'll see to it.”

Fleur stepped up to Ginny and gave her a hug. Then they walked from the room arm in arm as the rest of the family followed after. When they got back to the Gryffindor common room it was happily empty since there were still many chores to be done. Bill and Charlie helped Mrs. Weasley through the portal and they all took chairs by the fire.

“All right now. When your father and Percy return we'll figure out how we'll get Harry to the Burrow. No magical transportation can be used so we'll see if the Express can take us to London and then either a taxi or ministry car can drive us. Ron, Harry will be in your room as usual.”

“Wait a minute, Mum. Why not move them down to our room, Fred and mine. It’s bigger, you don’t hear the ghoul in the attic and it gets a lot of sun. I’ll be kipping at the store a lot and....”

“Thank you, George. That’s a wonderful idea. So that’s settled. Ron, I know you want to help George with the business, but I think it would be good to have you around for Harry so I’d ask you to plan on living at home this summer.”

“Sure, Mum. Although I bet he won’t even notice I’m gone with Ginny around the house.” He smiled at his sister who gave him a scornful look, stuck her tongue out at him, and then laughed.

“Yes, I think you might be right. Which brings me to a second point. You young lady, will behave yourself. I know how you feel about the boy but no funny business. He can’t be taxed that way.”

Ginny turned bright red, the Weasley boys all laughed and Fleur gave her hand a squeeze and whispered something in Ginny’s ear that sent them both off in near hysterics. They continued the conversation after that in a decidedly lighter mood. Late in the afternoon a Gryffindor third year came in and breathlessly told them that Mr. Weasley and Percy were waiting for them in the Great Hall. They all bustled out and hurried down the stairs.

Arthur and Percy Weasley stood up from the table as they entered. The hall was mostly empty as dinner was still an hour away and people were still about their chores. They looked tired, a bit anxious but still somehow quite satisfied. Molly hugged them both and they all sat down close together.

“First things first,” Arthur said. “How is Harry?”

“He’s exhausted. The doctor also said something about shock and emotional stress. He needs bed rest and a long recuperation. Likely all summer. He’ll be staying with us, Arthur.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. Well, I can tell you that we heard some wild rumors at the Ministry this morning. Harry had dropped dead, had gone mad, and had done all sorts of crazy things. We got a

message from the Headmistress about noon that said he had collapsed but was resting and expected to recover. That settled things down. It's still pretty chaotic, we uncovered more than a few turncoats. There will be some serious shakeup in the leadership, that's for sure."

"Too true, Dad," Percy offered. "Looks like Shacklebolt will stay on and Dad will be moving up. Lots of vacancies all round."

"So, how are all of you holding up? It's been pretty trying around here too, I'd wager," Mr. Weasley asked, putting his arm around his wife.

"Well yesterday went pretty well, Arthur. Harry wasn't doing well in the morning but I thought he improved as the day went. We sent Hermione off to arrange to go get her parents from Australia. Harry insisted on paying for it. He and I talked in the afternoon and I think we made some headway about his feeling responsible for everything but maybe I didn't do so well after all. The arrangements are made for tomorrow for Fred and the others." She smiled sadly at her husband. "This afternoon we all discussed what we need to do for Harry this summer. Do you think the Ministry can help us get him to the Burrow? He can't use any magic for quite a while, the doctor said."

"My dear, at this moment in time I believe we could get Harry hand carried all the way. What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking the Hogwarts Express and then a car from the train station."

"Easy enough. It's nearly end of term, such as it is. I can have a car waiting at the station with no problem."

"That's wonderful. So, how are the rest of you holding up? Bill, how are you doing with your teaching assignment?"

"We had a staff meeting yesterday. I have some idea about what I need to do. Harry's illness might complicate matters, but if he's resting at the Burrow, I don't think our having some conversations would hurt. Just no practical class preparation for a while." The last was said with a grin as his mother mock glared at him.

"How about you, Charlie?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I'll be heading back to Romania day after tomorrow, Dad. I have some research to finish, then I'm submitting an application to the Ministry for a research grant. A bit hush hush right now, but I'd be around more if it comes through."

"That would be great. Boys, what about you?" he said to Ron and George.

"We're going to get the store back in order. Had a few problems with the old Ministry. But I've got some new ideas, Fred had written down a bunch more. Ron made a great suggestion that we concentrate on inexpensive stuff right now. Not as much profit margin but people right now probably can't afford or won't want to buy more expensive stuff so we'll offer all kinds of cheap laughs for a year or so, build up the clientele then move into more high end stuff."

"Makes a lot of sense. Looks like you boys will do all right. I think the Ministry issues will disappear now. You were being harassed because of your connection to Harry and to me to some extent. We've taken care of that," Mr. Weasley said with a grim smile.

"Ginny, what about you? How are you doing?"

"Well, Dad, Harry and I had a long talk yesterday morning. We've come to an understanding, I guess you'd call it," she said, then blushed a bit but her dad was smiling. "Right now I guess I'll be helping him recover and then we're both back to school come September. We had talked about practicing our broom riding this summer but I guess that's out. I'll smack him with it if I see him even looking at his Firebolt."

This got a laugh from everyone.

"Fleur, you're awfully quiet. How are you, my dear," Arthur said to his daughter-in-law.

"I went to bed feeling very good last night, Father Weasley, I'm sorry, Dad. 'arry and I sat up a bit after the others and we talked and 'e made me feel very good about some theengs. Then this. Mon dieu. I think perhaps I should 'ave waited but he wanted to talk with me."

"Fleur, dear. If you went to bed feeling happy, I'm sure he did too. I don't think you caused him any harm, probably the opposite," Mrs. Weasley said.

Fleur just sighed and leaned into her husband's broad shoulder. That sat quietly for a few more minutes and then people began to drift in. Some stopped to ask how Harry was doing. The answer was the same, 'he's doing better but needs his rest.' Others asked Arthur how things were at the Ministry. 'A bit chaotic at first but things are settling down.' was the answer. Dinner proceeded without incident until a note was delivered to Professor McGonagall who then had it taken to the Weasleys. It was from Madame Pomfrey. Harry was awake and asking for them. They all quickly rose and hurried from the Hall. They left a hall full of chatter as they did. Within moments they reached the waiting room where Madame Pomfrey met them.

"He's still very weak but he's awake and aware. I'd ask that only two at a time go in and only for a few moments. Arthur and Molly first if you would."

She let them in and then moved off into the ward. Arthur and Molly walked up to Harry's bedside and looked down at him. His eyes were closed but they opened and they were as clear and bright as they recalled. He smiled slightly.

"Made a proper mess of it, haven't I."

"Don't be silly, Harry. It's not like you did it on purpose," Mr. Weasley said, trying to sound lighthearted.

Mrs. Weasley sat down and took Harry's hand.

"Don't you worry about a thing, Harry. You're still coming home with us and you'll be right as rain in no time. The doctor said you just need

rest, proper food and fresh air and you'll be fine. It's the least we could do and you're family after all, remember."

"Okay, 'Mum'." He said with a bit of an impish grin.

Mrs. Weasley had to fight the tears back again. Mr. Weasley coughed a bit and said,

"We can't take too much time. The others want to talk to you, too."

"About tomorrow. Can I still go? I have to. For Fred and the others."

"Out of the question, Harry. The doctor gave strict orders. No moving from that bed, no stress. Nothing."

"But..."

"But nothing, son. You of all people should know that sometimes you have to do the thing that is hard and not necessarily fair. Besides, and I don't mean to be unkind, but with everything that has happened, perhaps it's better. If you are there you'll draw a lot of attention and I think the focus should be on those we're burying. I don't know how else to say it, Harry."

"No, sir, you're right. I'm just being selfish and stupid."

"Wrong on both counts, but we won't argue that for now. We're going to go and let someone else in. We'll see you afterwards, tomorrow. Sleep well tonight."

"Good night, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said as she leaned over and kissed his forehead.

Next in were Ginny and Fleur. Harry smiled as he saw them come in.

"Ah, two of my three favorite girls in all the world," his voice light but barely more than a whisper.

“Harry, I thought we were done with you scaring us to death. What am I going to do with you?” Ginny said crossly but with her eyes alight and a small smile.

“I have a few ideas but it looks like they’ll have to wait,” his lips curling up a bit.

“Oh, Harry.”

She knelt down and took his hand and held it to her face, then she leaned forward and gave him a brief kiss on the lips. His hand came up and stroked her hair.

“Did I ever tell you how much I love your hair? Promise me you’ll never cut it.”

“I promise,” she said.

“Good.”

He then reached over and sought Fleur’s hand. She took his and held it tightly. He squeezed it and smiled up at her. She couldn’t trust her voice so she just smiled back.

“Harry, we are going to go now. I’m sure Madame Pomfrey is going to give you something to sleep through the night. I’ll be back in the morning. I promise.”

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Next came Bill and Charlie. They kept their comments brief and on the light side. Charlie even offered to keep Harry’s broom in shape with a long flight to Romania. Bill smirked and Harry gave a slight shrug. They left the room shortly afterwards and Ron and George came in. George did most of the talking, reassuring Harry that his investment in Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes was safe and guaranteed to grow. Ron nodded and gave Harry a smile. Next in was Percy.

“Wasn’t sure you’d want to talk to me, Harry. Not with some of the things I said about you and how I’ve behaved.”

"No worries, Perce. You came back, that's all that matters," Harry said and he raised his hand to Percy. They shook hands and Percy said,

"Thank, Harry, that means a lot coming from you." He paused, then added, "I'm the last of the lot. You should be able to get some rest now."

As Percy moved to leave, the door slid open and Hermione came into the room. She looked at Percy who nodded and moved around her and out the door.

"Oh, Harry, what have you done this time?" she said.

"Hey, can't blame this one on me. I was asleep. Had a bad dream. All went down the tubes after that. How are things going with your parents?" he asked.

"Typical you, turn it back on me. It's all set. I leave tomorrow. I should be back in about a week. Thank you for paying for it. I'm sure my parents will pay you back when they can."

"Forget it. I owe you a lot more for all the things you've done for me, especially this last year." His voice was getting weaker.

"That was because we're friends, Harry."

"So was the airfare."

She knelt down next to the bed and hugged him as best she could and he returned it. She felt his grip slacken and when she leaned back she saw he was asleep again. She stood up and gave his hand a final squeeze and let herself out of the ward. He woke up briefly around midnight and Madame Pomfrey was there to check on him and give him a potion. His sleep was deep and dreamless. When he awoke the next day around midmorning he was still weak but he was hungry. He looked around his bed and didn't see any kind of tray.

"Um, Madame Pomfrey? Hello?"

“Yes, Harry? Are you alright?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’m just kinda hungry,” Harry said.

“One moment, Harry. Breakfast is on the way.”

Harry settled back against his pillows and stared up at the ceiling. Yesterday’s events, what little he could recall were rather hazy in his mind. He knew he had visits from the Weasleys and Hermione but he had trouble remembering just what was said. He was painfully aware that he was missing the funeral but what he could recall of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley’s visit it was probably better if he wasn’t there. Something about being a distraction. He would just have to say good bye to Fred and the others in his own way in his own time. He was even having trouble remembering the nightmare that woke him up and led to his collapsing, but he was sure it was pretty bad. His introspection was cut off when Madame Pomfrey came with a small tray that held a bowl of thin broth, some thin slices of bread and cheese and a cup of pumpkin juice.

“Here you are, Harry. We need to go slowly for the first few meals, so take your time. Many of my patients are leaving this morning so you may hear a lot of commotion but just try to ignore it and relax. The Weasleys said they’d be up to see you before lunch.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Harry sat up and Madame Pomfrey plumped up his cushions so he was sitting up. Harry felt a little light headed but that passed quickly. Obeying orders, he took his time spooning up the soup and taking small bites of the bread and cheese. By the time he was done his stomach felt full but he was very tired. He drank the last of his pumpkin juice just as Madame Pomfrey came to collect the tray.

“Well done, Harry. I’ll just take that and you slide back down and rest a bit. It appears that people are coming back up to the castle so the funeral must be over. Your visitors should be along in a moment. I’ll only let in a few at a time and if you start feeling overtaxed you let me know.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Harry slid down against the pillows so that his head and shoulders were still propped up and he waited. It was perhaps twenty minutes when the door cracked open a bit. Madame Pomfrey hurried up and slipped into the waiting room. Harry could hear some conversation through the closed door, one a particularly deep tone. The first two visitors through the door were a bit of surprise. Professor McGonagall was followed by Acting Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Their faces were serious but not particularly grave.

“Good morning, Potter,” the Professor began. “How are you feeling, any better?”

“Yes, ma’am. Much better.” Harry saw the look the Professor gave him. “Well, a little better at least.”

“Potter, the Minister would like to have a word with you. I’ll leave you two alone. I’d like to talk to Poppy for a few moments.”

“Hello, Harry,” the Minister began in his deep voice. He held out his hand and shook Harry’s. “It would appear that we are all in your debt once again. It’s starting to get to be a habit.”

Harry’s face flushed and the Acting Minister laughed quietly as he pulled up the chair and sat down.

“Seriously, my boy. We do owe you a great deal. I know you’ve had a very bad time of it with the Ministry, particularly the last few years. It’s been a great embarrassment frankly and I would like to see us make amends. Is there anything we can do for you?”

“Well, sir, I’m not exactly in the best shape to do any serious thinking. What I can say is I plan to return to Hogwarts for my final year to get my NEWTs and then apply to become an Auror. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to have the Minister make a recommendation.”

Shacklebolt looked stunned.

“Harry, after all you’ve been through, you want to become an Auror and do more of it? Haven’t you had enough?”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But, it’s seems I have some talent for it and some experience too. I know Voldemort is dead but I can’t sit around and let some other dark witch or wizard follow in his footsteps. I think it’s what I’m supposed to do, sir.”

“Well, I can’t say that I’m not surprised, Harry, but if that’s what you want and you come up with the necessary NEWTs you can rest assured you’re in.” He paused and rubbed his head and then looked at Harry again. “I know this may sound rather cold Harry, but your joining the Ministry would go a long way in helping rebuild our reputation and credibility with our community.”

“I understand, sir. The Ministry has tried to use me in the past, even ruin me, but that was then and other people were involved. This time it’s my idea and the people involved are ones I can trust, I think,” Harry said, his voice fading at the end.

“Well, Harry, it’s obvious I’ve overstayed my time. You get your rest and I’ll make sure that Professor McGonagall is aware of your decision and my support for it and we’ll get you set up properly. We’ll talk again when you’re up to it. Take care, young man.”

With that, Shacklebolt shook Harry’s hand again, stood up and walked around the end of the curtain. He heard a murmured exchange and then he and the Professor went to the door. The Professor turned toward Harry,

“Potter, you and I will talk before you leave, but not before you’re well enough, all right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The rest of the morning consisted of brief visits from pairs of Weasleys and Hermione. She came first since she had to leave for the airport and her trip to Australia to collect her parents. She once again thanked Harry for his friendship and generosity. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a brief description of the service and what the

memorial park looked like. He would have to wait until he returned to school to see it. His name came up a time or two in discussions but overall it was a very nice, moving ceremony much appreciated by all the families. The Weasley siblings were brief and up beat, wishing Harry well. Once more Ginny and Fleur arrived together, this time they both knelt next to his bed, one on either side and gave him brief, heart felt hugs and kisses, Ginny on the lips, Fleur on the cheeks. He teased them in a hushed voice about getting so much attention from the two most beautiful girls ever to step foot in Hogwarts. This got him giggles and more kisses. As they were leaving, Madame Pomfrey came with another tray, his lunch this time, much the same as breakfast and another dose of potion. He was soon fast asleep and did not awake until around sunrise the next morning. Despite his protests to the contrary, Madame Pomfrey compelled him to use a wheel chair to get to the washroom where he could tend to himself and get a little wash up. By the time he returned to his bed he was heavily fatigued and glad he hadn't walked. Along about mid-morning he received an unexpected visitor, Professor Slughorn.

"So, Poppy? How is our patient getting along?"

"Our patient?" asked Harry.

"Yes, Harry. The potion that is allowing you to sleep without any dreams has been made by Professor Slughorn. It's a very subtle thing, I understand. One of his specialties."

"Oh, not at all, Poppy. A simple thing really, if you have the experience. Only too glad to help out. I'll make sure you have a good batch of it to take when you leave school, Potter. You'll likely need it for a few weeks more. Well, back to the dungeons. Have to get things ready for close of term, such as it is."

While Harry wasn't particularly crazy about Slughorn, with his tendency to collect pet students, he was a lot easier to deal with than had been Professor Snape and Harry would need a potion NEWT for Auror training. Lunch was a bit more substantial and he was able to eat it with company. Ginny and Ron came up with a tray for themselves and Madame Pomfrey provided a much more robust soup with little slices of meat, cheese and bread. It was less tiring to

eat now and he was doing better at keeping his end of the conversation going. Occasionally he would reach out and take Ginny's hand just to feel the warmth of it. Ron would smirk, then smile. After lunch another dose of potion put him under until the next morning.

As promised the little wizard healer from St. Mungo's returned and gave Harry a thorough going over, using both mundane and magical tests. After perhaps half an hour of poking, prodding, wand waving and incantation mumbling, he sat on the chair and looked at Harry.

"Well, young man, you're doing much better than last I saw you. You're not out of the woods yet, but you're well on your way. I would like to ask you a few questions. I have a few suspicions, did some research, but there are still some holes I need filled."

"Yes, sir, I'll do my best," Harry replied.

"Mr. Potter, it's my understanding that you had a rather special, close connection with Voldemort, see, I can say it now. Can you tell me about that?"

"Yes, sir," and Harry explained about the night his parents died, the special magic invoked by his mother's sacrifice, the use of his blood to revive Voldemort's body and the whole issue of Horcruxes. He then related the conversation that Snape and Dumbledore had that he overheard in Snape's memory in the Pensieve. As the healer listened he nodded here and there. When Harry was done the healer leaned back in his chair.

"This helps explain quite a bit, Harry. If I understand it then, something that you've carried around with you since you were a year old was suddenly ripped away by Voldemort's attempt to kill you in the Forbidden Forest. You had the fighting before and the fighting afterwards. Yes, yes. A great deal of strain and a tremendous drain on your strength. Your collapse is no great surprise then. The dream you had triggered a great emotional response, again draining already diminished reserves. Well, I have no doubts that we will get you back on your feet with rest and proper diet. As to the dreams, that I cannot guarantee as easily. But it is obvious that you have a great deal of

support and that should help. It will, though, in the end, be up to you. Strength of mind and character will tell the tale, yes. Unless you have any questions, I think we are done here. I would suggest you stop by St. Mungo's near the end of the summer. I understand you are coming back to school? Yes and I'm sure Professor McGonagall would appreciate a clean bill of health. See you then?"

"Yes, sir, I'll do that and thank you for your time."

"Not at all, my boy. We all must do our part. Good day to you and good luck. I just need to consult briefly with Madame Pomfrey and then I'm off."

Harry smiled as the healer turned and left. It did seem to make sense. So much had happened practically all at once and with the whole Horcrux issue he figured he was lucky he didn't fall apart all together. Ron, Ginny and Fleur paid him a visit that afternoon to tell him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had left the school for a while, Mr. Weasley to go back to the Ministry with Percy to continue the reorganization and Mrs. Weasley back to the Burrow to get the house in order for when they all come home. Bill was working to figure out how to revise the curriculum for the DADA class and he was anxious to talk to Harry about it. Charlie was off to Romania but would be home again for a bit in mid summer. George was back at the shop starting to get things ready to reopen. Harry noticed that Ron still had trouble talking whenever Fleur was around. He couldn't help but smile.

"Oh, 'arry, it is good to see you smile like that. What makes you so 'appy?"

"Oh, I don't know, nothing special," he lied. "I'm feeling pretty good, I'm glad you're here and the healer gave me some good news this morning. That's all worth some smiles, don't you think."

"It sure is, Harry," replied Ginny. "In fact, it's getting kind of contagious."

She broke into a huge smile and took Harry's hand. Fleur smiled and Ron laughed. Harry thought that was the greatest sound. Madame Pomfrey told Harry later in the day that his dose of potion was being

cut back and his need was to eat more so dinner was added starting that afternoon. She brought him a bowl of savory stew, a plate of bread slices with cheese and pumpkin juice. Harry devoured it all and enjoyed it immensely. When Madame Pomfrey took his tray away she told him he could get out of bed for a while in the morning and sit up in the chair. After lunch that day, as he was sitting up in bed, Professor McGonagall paid him a call.

“Well, Potter, I must say you’re looking much better today. You had me thoroughly worried, young man. But I think now would be a good time for us to have that discussion I mentioned the other day. I had a visit from the Acting Minister after he talked to you. He was very supportive of your intent to become an Auror. I seem to recall that we had a discussion along those lines when that despicable Umbridge woman was here. I have spoken with all of the teachers involved and each has agreed to help you prepare for your NEWTs. It will mean a great deal of work, Potter. I’m fairly certain that the distractions you’ve had in the past won’t happen this coming year but you will need to concentrate all your efforts. You’ll get your list of required books and materials as usual. As far as your teaching duties are concerned I believe you’ll have ample opportunity to work with Bill Weasley to sort that out. I would suggest that you enlist Ms Granger to help you get organized, but remember, Potter, it’s your insights, experiences and knowledge that we need here so don’t let others decide too much of what you will do with this assignment.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m actually looking forward to it. Despite what else was going on, I did enjoy working with the DA and watching how they progressed. I can see why you like to teach.”

“Well, I must say that there have been times, especially with you and your partner, Ron Weasley, when I was ready to quit but yes, most of the time I still love what I do. And as for that, I know you have your mind set on going into Auror training but I think you should think about a career in education, as I said, the DA members told me you have a real knack for teaching,” the Professor said.

“I won’t say I hadn’t considered it but I think what I’m going to do is more important right now. There’s something else to consider. If things go the way I hope, I’ll have a family and kids someday and

likely they'll come here. It will be tough enough having the famous Harry Potter for a dad, having him in school with them would be even worse. Maybe once they've left school and I've gained more experience I'll be ready to consider it."

"Very well, Potter, I can't argue your logic. By the way, have you given any thought to Quidditch for this last year? As you can imagine there was no competition this year."

"I'd like to. I'll have to see how I feel about it once I've gone through my courses and teaching with Hermione and Bill. I have a feeling I'll need something for the stress relief."

"If you decide to play, the position of captain would be available to you."

"Oh, no, I don't think so, Professor. I remember how crazy that made Wood and Angelina Johnson. Let someone else deal with that. If I play, I'll just want to concentrate on playing, if you don't mind." Harry laughed.

The Professor chuckled as well as she said,

"You're growing wiser, Potter. I think you're right. Well, I'm glad to see you're doing well and we'll talk again before you leave, I'm sure."

With that she rose and left the ward. A while later Harry slowly pulled himself out of bed and sat in the chair again. From there he could look out the window and see what a bright beautiful day it was. Shortly thereafter, Madame Pomfrey came along with the wheelchair.

"Oh, I see you're up, very good. Let's go for a little ride, shall we, Harry?"

"Yes, ma'am, where to?"

"A very quiet comfortable spot that's perfect on an afternoon like today."

She wheeled him through the ward which he could now see was empty besides him. They went through another set of doors which opened onto a balcony that was more like a small courtyard. It caught the full afternoon sun and was warm without being uncomfortably so. There were a few small potted trees, some chairs and benches and a low wall around two sides and the walls of the castle on the other two.

"I thought you could do with some fresh air and sunshine, Harry. Why don't you shift over to this chair here and make yourself comfortable. A couple of hours here should do you a world of good."

"Thank you, Madame Pomfrey. This is really great."

"If you need anything, I'll be close enough to hear you. If anyone comes to visit I'll send them out."

"Thank you."

Harry settled back in the well formed wooden chair and took in the sights he could see from where he was. He was too far from the edge to make out the grounds but he could see the mountains behind the town and beyond the lake. He watched the few puffy clouds float by and he allowed himself the luxury of not thinking about much at all. He found this a wonderful luxury. He did wonder if anyone else would visit today but he reminded himself there was a lot to do and even the famous Harry Potter had to take a back seat now and then. He let his head rest on the back of the chair and just let the sun warm his face. It was perhaps an hour after he began his sunbathing that he heard the door open up and a familiar voice said,

"Alright there, Harry?"

It was Hagrid. Harry realized he hadn't seen him since his collapse. His eyes popped open and he sat up and looked at his gigantic friend. Hagrid had to stoop to get out onto the balcony and stood towering over Harry in his chair.

"Yeah, Hagrid, I'm doing loads better. It's good to see ya."

"Blimey, Harry, ya had us all pretty worried. I got summat for ya."

He reached under his moleskin coat and produced the largest role of parchment Harry had ever seen. It looked big even in Hagrid's manhole cover sized hand.

"Some of us have been workin' on this for the last couple days. I woulda been up ta see ya sooner but I've lots to do but this couldn't wait."

"What is it?"

"Take a look. I'll hold it for ya."

Hagrid held the top of the scroll and let it unroll on the stone floor in front of Harry. Across the top in big flowing script it read,

"By General Acclamation"

Underneath in smaller, neater script it read,

"We the undersigned, by general consensus, do declare and affirm our everlasting gratitude to Mr. Harry Potter, son of Lily and James Potter, for his paramount role in the defeat and destruction of Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort and his accursed followers, the Death Eaters.

His courage, resourcefulness and perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds have once and for all freed the wizarding world and the world in general of a grave and terrible threat. Despite numerous life-and-death encounters, physical injury and illness, emotional stress and public ridicule, he never faltered nor failed in

his convictions and led us out of the darkness into a bright future.

Below this were hundreds of signatures, many he recognized but most he didn't. Several groupings were evident. One was members of the DA, another the small group of remaining members of the Order of the Phoenix. A surprising number looked to have come from the Ministry of Magic, with Kingsley Shacklebolt at the top. It looked like all the staff at the school had signed and many, many more at random. Some just names, others with little notes of thanks or wishes to get well soon. Harry was quite overwhelmed. He reached out and pulled up the lower edge of the scroll to see all the names. He looked up at Hagrid, whose eyes were crinkled up in a big smile, and the best he could come up with was,

"Wow, Hagrid."

"Yeah, Harry, it was amazin', one of the muggle borns mentioned about something called 'get well cards' and it all kinda blew up from there. I promised I'd hold on ta it fer ya."

For someone as large as Hagrid, watching him swell with pride was really something to see.

"Thanks, Hagrid, I'd appreciate it. Not much room here for me to keep that safe."

Hagrid stayed for a while and told Harry about what he had been up to the last few days. Harry finally found out where the tracks down by the lake came from. Apparently, one of giants that had allied with Voldemort had been killed and Garwp had dragged the body down to the lake and the giant squid had reached out and dragged the huge body into the water.

He then helped herd the giant spiders back into the forest. He spent some time talking with the centaurs. The last minute intervention by some of them had created quite a rift in their community. Hagrid told Harry he didn't know if he helped much but at least he kept them from open violence. Even a bow wielding Centaur will think twice about crossing a twelve foot half giant with a crossbow in one hand and a six foot club in the other.

Harry enjoyed Hagrid's visit but he was ready to return to his bed when Madame Pomfrey came to shoo Hagrid out and wheel Harry back into the ward. A note was lying on his pillow. He picked it up and held it as he crawled into bed. As he lay there he cracked the plain wax seal and opened the paper. He read,

"Harry,

We've been very busy getting ready to return on the Hogwarts Express.

Sorry we didn't get up to see you yet today. Look for us around dinner time.

See you soon.

Ginny, Ron and Neville."

Harry settled back into his pillow and stared up at the ceiling. Another couple of days and he would be going 'home' on the Express. He hoped he'd be allowed to go to the train under his own power. He flashed on an absurd scene where he was carried down to the station in a sedan chair, something he had seen in a muggle movie years before. He couldn't help but laugh. His friends were as good as their word. Just as Madame Pomfrey brought him his dinner, more hearty stew and such, the door to the ward opened and in came Ginny, Ron and Neville with trays loaded with dinner goodies.

"Yes, well," began the nurse, "that lot is fine for you three, but Harry sticks with what I've given him. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," they replied in unison.

When Madame Pomfrey turned her back the three smiled at Harry and winked. Ginny took the chair that was already in place and set the tray on her lap. The boys set their trays on the end of Harry's bed then pulled two chairs over that were next to now empty beds. With Harry the only one left in the ward, they didn't have to be overly

cautious about noise but they did restrain themselves somewhat so as not to draw the ire of Madame Pomfrey.

"I got your note," Harry said around a mouthful of bread. "What were you guys up to this afternoon?"

"With all the work going on around the place, today was the first day we've had to get our stuff together, you know, pack trunks, find all our confiscated junk. Those two Death Eaters that were skulking around as Snape's deputies stole, excuse me, confiscated a lot of gear. Took us a while to find where they stashed it," Neville said.

"Yeah, they took everything we had that had to do with Quidditch, jokes or any other fun. Anything from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes got you a month's detention. They wrecked my broom, Harry," Ginny stated with some heat.

"I'll take care of that, Ginny. I figure I'm a few Christmas and birthday presents behind," Harry said with a grin.

Ginny's eyes lit up in a bright smile. But then she looked down at her tray,

"I dunno, Harry, that's kind of a lot of money, you probably shouldn't be spending it on me."

Harry looked at Ron and Neville.

"Did you guys hear something, I couldn't quite make that out," Harry said seriously.

Neville and Ron tried in vain to suppress laughing while Ginny looked up and leaned over her tray to slap Harry's arm. But her eyes were bright again. They continued to discuss what had been going on while Harry convalesced. He mentioned Hagrid's visit.

"Wasn't that brilliant, Harry?" Ron exclaimed. "That roll of parchment went everywhere in just a few days. People were queuing up all day long to sign it when it started here. The three of us got to jump the line since we're such close friends of the famous Harry Potter," Ron

said, puffing out his chest with mock importance, a very serious look on his face. They he started to laugh.

Harry started to laugh too and then he looked at the three of them and said,

“A guy couldn’t have better friends, famous or not. Thanks for sticking with me all these years,” Harry said quietly but firmly.

“No problem, mate. It’s been a rough ride at times, but we came through it in fairly decent shape,” offered Neville.

“I wouldn’t have made it through my first year if it hadn’t been for you, Harry. I won’t ever forget that.”

Ginny smiled at him but her eyes got a little tight around the corners as she remembered the horrors of her first year at Hogwarts and her possession by the sixteen year old shadow of Tom Riddle.

“Believe me, I won’t let you. Every time you start to give me a hard time, I’ll remind you,” Harry said with a devilish grin.

“Oh, you are so horrible,” Ginny exclaimed but she laughed none the less and the tension was broken. They were nearly finished with their dinner when Madame Pomfrey returned.

“All right everyone. Time to let Harry get his rest. I’ll need to ask you three a favor however. I’ll need you here bright and early tomorrow so you can go with Harry down to breakfast. I think it’s time he got some exercise and it would be good to let people see how well he’s doing. Some of the rumors have been positively ridiculous.”

The four young people were ecstatic with this news and the three friends promised to be there right at the appointed minute. The boys shook Harry’s hand and Ginny gave him a brief but heart felt kiss. They all said their good nights and ‘see you in the mornings’. Madame Pomfrey gave Harry a much smaller dose of the potion and as it began to take affect, he nestled into his pillow; more content then he had been in a long, long while.

He awoke the next morning in time to walk himself to the boy's washroom to get himself cleaned up and presentable. His hair, as always, had a mind of its own, but at least today it seemed to be a bit more cooperative. When he returned he found clean clothes and robes. He could only assume they were delivered by house-elves. He was dressed and talking with Madame Pomfrey when his friends arrived. Ginny saw him standing and rushed to wrap her arms around him and give him a warm kiss. Ron and Neville stood there grinning widely.

"Now, Harry, you are to take your time. Don't exert yourself and if you feel dizzy or disoriented, have them bring you right back here. And you three," she said firmly, fixing them with a stare, "keep your eye on him and make sure he doesn't get carried away."

"Yes, Madame Pomfrey," they chorused in unison.

Ron and Neville led the way while Ginny and Harry walked hand-in-hand a couple of steps behind them. They took their time going down the staircase and through the corridor that led them to the Great Hall. People were starting to file in and there where many shouted greetings to Harry as they noticed the four friends make their way to the Gryffindor table.

Harry noticed there were very few adults present, he guessed most had left after the funeral and those that remained were primarily workmen trying to get the building and grounds back into shape. Harry was glad to be sitting down. The trip to and from the hospital wing could be taxing for him. Harry looked up to the faculty table and got a big shaggy grin from Hagrid, a small smile from Professor McGonagall and a few nods from other staff members.

With the familiar faces and relatively common place conversation Harry could almost let himself slip back in time to when he was a regular Hogwarts student, or as close as he ever could be to one. As the food appeared on the table Harry had to restrain himself from piling his plate high with everything close to hand. Madame Pomfrey had given him strict instructions of what and how much he should eat.

As he ate, he listened much and said little until someone broached a serious subject. It was a bulky fifth year student that Harry recognized as a Gryffindor Quidditch player from the time he was suspended.

“Hi, Harry. Um, some of us were wondering. We hear you’re planning to come back next year. Are you planning to come out for the team?”

“I’m not entirely sure right now. I’d like to but it depends on how well I’m doing at the start of the term and how much time I think I’ll have from my studies and extra duties.”

“Okay, Harry. Well, it would be brilliant if you can make the team. So long, Harry.”

Harry looked at Ginny. “I recognized that guy but I can’t recall a name.”

“That was Jerry something or other. He was a beater after George and Fred got banned along with you. He’s not bad. A little slow in the air but he can knock a bludger from one end of the pitch to the other.”

The conversation turned to Quidditch for a while and slowly Harry’s first regular meal in almost a week came to an end. He looked at his friends and said,

“Ok, I survived that. What’s next?”

“Well, Harry, Nev and I still have some things to do. I promised I’d help him help Professor Sprout close up the greenhouses. As you might recall I didn’t have anything here this year to pack so I’m traveling light back home with you and Ginny.”

“I’m done packing, Harry. Maybe we could take a little walk, get you some fresh air,” Ginny said with a small smile.

“I’d love to. See you guys at lunch?”

“Right, Harry. Don’t overdo it, mate,” Ron laughed.

Harry gave him a mock scowl. They parted company at the main door and Harry took Ginny's hand as they set off down towards the lake. They moved at a deliberately slow pace, as much to conserve Harry's energy as to allow them to stay close together and not trip over one another. As they approached the water's edge Harry noticed that the marks left by the giant's corpse had been repaired. It promised to be a warm clear day and he could see the tentacles of the giant squid slowly waving just below the surface. As they began to walk further along Ginny slipped her hand out of Harry's and put her arm around his waist and pulled him to her. He draped his arm over her shoulders and she leaned her head against his upper arm. She sighed and said,

"This is so nice, Harry. This is what I had hoped for us before Professor Dumbledore died. The two of us together, no life and death situations, like regular people."

"I don't know if either of us is exactly regular but I know what you mean. I'm about as happy right now as I think I can be."

He stopped them and pulled Ginny around so that they were embracing face to face. He held her with her head against his chest and then she looked up at him and into his bright green eyes and smiled. He smiled back and said,

"I love you, Ginny Weasley."

"I love you, Harry Potter."

Their lips met and it was not the brief warm kisses that Ginny had given him as he lay in his hospital bed. This one communicated all the pent up emotions that they had felt toward and about each other over the last turbulent, often confusing seven years. When they pulled apart sometime later there was no doubt how either of them felt. Harry's legs shook a bit and he leaned into Ginny.

"Harry, are you okay?" she said with genuine concern.

"Oh sure, I'm fine. You just have that affect on me. You make me go weak in the knees," he said with a lopsided grin.

“I’m glad to hear that, but I think we should sit down for a bit anyway.”

So they found a bench in a quiet spot and sat together, Ginny wrapped in Harry’s arm, his other hand holding on to both of hers and they talked about nothing in particular, just enjoying being together. Harry’s stomach gave a grumble after awhile and Ginny giggled.

“I guess we should start back for lunch,” she said with a laugh.

“Good idea, but first.” He bent down and gave her another kiss to which she responded with enthusiasm. They pulled apart after a while and Harry said,

“Wow, I didn’t think it was possible. I’ve found something I like more than Quidditch.”

Ginny laughed delightedly and hugged Harry tightly, and then she bounced up off the bench and pulled him to his feet. They walked hand in hand back up to the castle and lunch. As they walked into the grand hall they searched out Ron and Neville, who were sitting together at the senior end of the Gryffindor table, both of them looking decidedly dirty. Harry thought Professor Sprout must have been working them hard. As they went to sit down Ron looked up and said,

“Harry, you need to go up to the staff table before you eat.”

“Ok, do you know what’s up?”

“Sorry, mate. Some first year was sent down here to tell us,” Neville told him.

“Hang on, I’ll be right back,” he said and gave Ginny’s hand a squeeze, then he moved to the table at what could best be called cautious haste.

“Here, Potter,” Professor McGonagall called to him.

“Yes, ma’am. You wanted to see me?”

“Actually, I have a message from Madame Pomfrey. She reminds you that you are to take it slow and to be back in the ward right after dinner. You’ll need to be up early tomorrow to get to the train. In addition, you are to report to Professor Slughorn before you leave to get your sleep potion. It’s an important part of your recovery, Potter, I’d advise you not forget it.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll make sure I get it,” Harry replied. The Professor continued in a quieter tone.

“I also have a message for you from Professor Dumbledore. He was very dismayed by your illness but he has every confidence in your ability to achieve a complete recovery. He asks that you refrain from any adventuring this summer. He said he has found your propensity for finding or attracting trouble to be most disconcerting.”

The last was said with a wry smile. Harry couldn’t help laughing.

“Alright, Professor I’ll do my best, although the Weasleys garden gnomes might cause me some trouble.”

“I’m sure you will be able to handle them, Potter. Professor Dumbledore asks that when you return to Hogwarts at start of term that you pay him a visit.”

“Couldn’t I see him before I go, Professor?” Harry said, suddenly eager to talk to his mentor.

“I’m afraid not, Potter. He specifically told me that it not be before the start of term.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Harry was a little disappointed but also thrilled that he would be able to talk to the Headmaster again.

“That’s all for now, Potter. Go get something to eat,” she said, firmly but kindly.

Harry smiled and then turned away and headed back to his place at the table. Lunch passed pleasantly. Ron and Neville regaled Harry and Ginny and anyone else that was listening to their tales of

horticultural daring-do subduing various hostile plant life, cleaning up potting tables and ensuring that the watering system was in good repair. Neville explained that he was going to be returning to Hogwarts himself the next year. He was going to be doing additional study with Professor Sprout, going on collection expeditions, sort of a post graduate program.

"That's brilliant, Neville. It'll be cool having you with us. Ron, do you think you'll be able to get up here to visit?" Harry asked.

"I'd think so, Harry. George and I are talking about setting up a shop here at Hogsmeade so I'll think you'll be seeing a lot of us," Ron said with a smile.

"That's great, Ron. This is going to be a great year."

"Just slow down there a minute, Mr. Potter," Ginny said very firmly. "You have a lot to do this summer, as in get yourself well, so don't get all excited about school just yet. One thing at a time."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied with mock seriousness. Then he grinned at her.

"I'm not kidding, Harry. You know what the healer and Madame Pomfrey said. This is one time the famous Mr. Harry Potter does what he's told to do. And if he can't do it for himself, maybe he can do it for all the people who care about him."

The look Ginny gave him while she said this was a mix of righteous indignation and anxious pleading. Ron and Neville sat in silence looking back and forth from Harry to Ginny and back. Others who happened to be near by seemed to be holding their collective breath.

Harry's eyes tightened and his face reddened. He stared intently at the beautiful girl who had been the subject of many of his dreams and daydreams. Then his face relaxed and the red drained from his cheeks. He reached out and took her hand and let out a long breath.

"You're right, Ginny. I do have a tendency to not think things through sometimes and not pay attention to people if I don't want to. It's one

thing my dad and I have in common, being a bit full of ourselves. I'll do it your way. I'm glad you'll be around to let the air out of me when I get too puffed up," he said with a sad smile.

"Oh, Harry, I didn't mean it that way. You just have a habit of putting yourself in danger without considering the consequences. I just want you to please be careful. For me?"

"For you, anything," Harry said. He gave her another, somewhat cheerier smile.

"I think I should go back to the hospital wing. It's going to be a long day tomorrow and I'm kinda tired right now."

Ron looked at Ginny and saw her stricken look but he voiced his agreement with Harry.

"Good idea, mate, you do look a little done in. We'll walk you back up. Madame Pomfrey will have our skins if we don't."

The four friends walked back up to the hospital wing. Harry was quiet with a brooding look on his face, his eyes cast down in front of him as he walked. Ginny walked slightly behind him, her hands clasped in front of her. Ron and Neville glanced at each other repeatedly, clearly worried with Harry's sudden turn. They entered the hospital ward. Harry sat down at the end of his bed and looked up at the boys.

"Would you guys mind leaving Ginny and I alone for bit?"

"Sure, Harry, um, we'll just wait for Ginny outside," Ron replied.

"Thanks," Harry replied, looking back down at the floor. Ginny sat down in the chair beside the bed, wringing her hands in her lap. When the door closed she said hurriedly,

"Harry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean..."

Harry raised his hand palm outward to stop her.

"You've nothing to be sorry about, Ginny. You're absolutely right."

He stretched his hand out to her and she timidly placed her hand in his. He closed his fingers around it and pulled her gently so that she wound up sitting next to him on the bed. He didn't let go of her hand but he still looked down at the floor.

"What I said down in the Great Hall a few minutes ago wasn't the half of it. When I really think about it, most of what I've done since coming here to Hogwarts has been more luck than skill or brains. You know, the first time I caught the snitch was by accident. Finding the Sorcerer's Stone had more to do with Ron and Hermione getting us through. I sometimes think I've just been stumbling along relying on luck and other people to get by. The famous Harry Potter. More like the fraud Harry Potter," Harry finished, his voice low and bitter.

Ginny was stunned. Her admonishment of Harry earlier was simply intended to make him understand that she wanted him to be careful and not try and do anything too strenuous while he was recuperating. Now she was genuinely frightened by Harry's abrupt change in mood after the wonderful day they had spent.

"Harry. How could you possibly think that? From what Ron and Hermione had said it was you that finally figured out how someone was going to get past that three headed dog. You were the one that outwitted Tom Riddle and fought and killed the Basilisk to save me and destroy Riddle's memory. I could go on and on, but Harry even if you did get lucky now and again, it was you that turned that luck into something great. You've been brave and smart any number of times and you're the best flyer anyone has seen in years and years. Look at me. I said look at me." Her voice was filled with anxiety and desperation. "Yes, you've made mistakes. But you always stood up for them and worked to make things better and in the end, you were the one who figured out how to deal with Voldemort and beat him, you Harry. Do you understand me?"

Harry looked at her with those brilliant green eyes that were his mother's and saw a very frightened young woman sitting next to him. She was frightened for him, not of him. She was someone who cared about him deeply, perhaps more than anyone or anything in the world and here he sat saying stupid things and feeling stupid feelings that

were making her miserable. What right did he have do that to her, who in the last week has lost a brother, has been scared to death when Harry collapsed and now being emotionally whipsawed about with his nonsense? He shook his head and gave Ginny a rueful grin.

"Can you tell me something?" he asked her quietly.

"Of course, Harry," she said almost eagerly.

"How is it possible that you could fall in love with such a total prat?"

Her eyes grew wide in shock and then misted over as she began to giggle, then laugh, tears running down her face. She threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in Harry's shoulder. He rested his cheek on the top of her head, running his hand up and down her back.

"I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm just being stupid. That's something else you'll have to watch for and tell me about."

"I promise to break it to you gently when you do."

They stayed that way for a few minutes then Ginny pulled away, stood up and walked to the door. She stuck her head out and Harry could hear her say something.

She then turned around and came back over to sit by Harry's side. She wrapped her arms around his waist and he around her shoulders. They remained silent for some moments and then they began to speak of little things. Normally these things would not have seemed important, but for the two of them, for the rest of their lives, these moments would be regarded as the true beginning for them. In this quiet corner of an otherwise empty hospital ward they left behind the emotional rubble of a troubled youth and began to build a life together as happy adults. It was some hours later that they left the ward and walked hand in hand back down to the Great Hall for the last dinner of the most tumultuous term in Hogwarts history.

Ron and Neville eyed Harry from their spot at the table. He and Ginny sat down across from them. Harry could see the question plain on their faces. He decided to answer before they were asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, no, I'm not loosing my mind and yes, Ginny and I are just great. I'm sorry I've been such a prat lately. Been a bit of a roller coaster ride for us all."

"What's a roller coaster?" Ron asked.

"Oh, sorry. It's something that muggles like to take rides on. Gives 'em a thrill. It's sort of like a small train that goes up and down and around tight turns. I meant the up and down part. I don't think it was very thrilling for anyone."

"I dunno, mate. If by thrills you mean scaring us half to death, I'd say the night you had your nightmare was pretty thrilling," Neville said with a wry smile.

Harry could only laugh and repeat that he was lucky to have such great friends. Harry felt much better and was able to enjoy a good dinner and light conversation. They were just finishing up their dessert when Professor McGonagall stepped up to the podium and motioned for quiet.

"We have come to the end of a very difficult term. But in that end comes the hope for a much better future. We have gained much and lost much."

She paused as she looked about the room, noticing the empty spots at various tables. The Slytherin table in particular had many vacancies. She continued,

"I would like to make some announcements concerning our next term. In light of the fact that there was a great deal of disruption to this year's studies we will be commencing the term one week early for second through seventh years. I would ask that you take time during your summer holidays to review your course work from this year and reviews will be held during the first week back. While there will be no formal exams, we will be gauging how well you've retained this year's

teachings. I regret to say that the muggle born students who were expelled early this past year will need to repeat but the Ministry has made special arrangements to compensate them for the lost year. If you have friends amongst them please take the time to reach out to them and help ease them back into the school community. One last time, I would like to thank you all for everything you've done to help us get through this terrible time. We of course are not able to award a house cup this year, but instead, to commemorate events, the name of each house will be engraved upon the cup and it will stand in the front hall for all to see as a reminder of our need to stand together. Have a good night and we'll see you off first thing in the morning."

The assembled students stood and applauded the acting Headmistress, who smiled back at them and then left the Great Hall with the other faculty and staff. The students took their time leaving the tables. Harry and his friends stayed behind at their spots commenting on the Professor's announcements.

"Seems like you've got some catching up to do, Harry. It's been a whole year since your sixth year."

"You're forgetting, Neville, I've already taken my sixth year exams. Ginny's going to have a problem, she had to leave months ago."

"Don't worry, Harry, I'll get some help from Hermione. I'll be fine," Ginny said.

They talked for a while longer then got up from the table.

"You coming to the tower, Harry?" Ron asked.

"I don't think so, mate. I'm sure Madame Pomfrey wants to give me another check up before I go. Plus I'll need my supply of potion. It'll be easier to take care of it if I stay up there tonight."

"Okay, Harry, we'll walk you up there."

The four friends took their time on the way to the hospital ward, Harry and Ginny hand-in-hand, Ron and Neville on either side of them. As

they entered the waiting room outside the ward, Madame Pomfrey came through ward door.

"Ah, Harry, very good. I want you to get a good night sleep ahead of traveling tomorrow," she said when she saw them. "Professor Slughorn will have your supply of potion waiting for you in the morning at breakfast. I have tonight's dose for you. Say your goodnights and I'll see you inside."

She turned and went back into the ward but left the door open.

"G'night, Harry," Ron said.

"See ya in the morning, mate," Neville offered.

"G'night guys, see you at breakfast and thanks," Harry replied with a smile.

"Good night, Harry," Ginny said softly, pulling his head down for a brief kiss.

"Good night, Ginny," he murmured as he put his arms around her for a tight embrace.

He reluctantly let her go and he watched as the three turned and headed out of the waiting room, Ginny the last who turned and blew him a kiss, then closed the door behind her. He walked into the ward room, changed into his pajamas behind the screen and crawled into bed. It had been a difficult but in the end, satisfying day and he welcomed the chance to get some sleep. Madame Pomfrey appeared with a small cup of the potion that kept him dream free. In minutes, he was sound asleep.

"Harry, Harry, it's time to wake up. You're going home today."

"What, um, oh, okay, yes. Thanks, Madame Pomfrey," Harry said as he scrubbed at his eyes.

He pulled himself out of bed and trudged off to the washroom. When he came back he once more found clean clothes waiting for him. He

pulled on his pants and shirt, threw on his robe and was in the process of putting on his shoes when Madame Pomfrey came around the screen.

"Hold on there a minute, Harry, if you please."

She took his chin in her hand and looked carefully at this face and eyes. Harry could see her eyes shift as they roamed over his face until they came back to his eyes. He noticed her mouth twitch twice. He held his breath.

"Well, Harry, it would appear that you are doing very well, but that does not mean that you are recovered. I mean to say that you are doing better than I would have thought possible so soon, but you still have a ways to go. I can still see a great deal of fatigue around your eyes. I will be sending instructions by owl to Mrs Weasley, who, I am sure, will make sure you follow them. Make sure you don't leave your potion behind. And Harry, please do try to stay out of my hospital ward during this coming term." The last was said with a kindly smile.

"Yes, ma'am, I'll do my best," Harry said with a wry smile but then his expression turned serious. "I'm sorry I've been such a bother. I didn't mean to be."

"Oh, Harry," she exclaimed and took his face in both of her gentle hands. "You've never once been a bother, a challenge yes, but never a bother and don't ever think that. You must come see me if you have need. I am just hoping you have at least one term where it won't be necessary or under such dire consequences."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said, somewhat embarrassed.

"Alright, off you go then and have a quiet, healthy summer."

Harry proceeded with deliberate haste down to the Great Hall. The mood in the hall was one of great excitement. After so much had happened everyone was eager to start their journey home. Harry grabbed his usual seat next to Ginny. His friends had already started in on their breakfast.

“Harry!” Ginny exclaimed. “We were getting worried you’d miss breakfast.”

“Madame Pomfrey wanted to give me a last look before I left. She said I was doing better then she thought was possible but I still had a ways to go. She’s sending my instructions straight to your mum. I guess she doesn’t trust me to stick to the rules. I wonder where she got that idea,” Harry laughed.

“Oh, I dunno, Harry. You do have a certain reputation, mate,” Ron said with a snicker. Neville smirked and Ginny giggled.

Harry gave Ron a “what? me?” look and then shrugged and began serving himself breakfast. Knowing he was behind he ate and spoke little. He was just finishing his second helping of eggs when Professor McGonagall gaveled for attention.

“Your attention, please. I believe all has been said that needs to be said. I wish you a pleasant and peaceful summer. Enjoy the time for you truly deserve it and return to us ready for a new and busy year. The carriages are waiting. Potter, if you would, please remain. I have a few words for you.”

Harry looked at his friends and could only shrug. Ginny smiled and squeezed his leg.

“Nothing to worry about, Harry. I’m sure she just wants to say a personal good bye and make sure you don’t get trampled by the rest of us. See you on the train.” With that she kissed his cheek and joined the crush for the door.

When the last of the students had exited, the Professor strode down the aisle between the tables and came to stand by Harry, who had risen to meet her.

“Potter..Harry, my comment applies to you especially. Enjoy your time as best you can without violating too many of the healer’s orders. The wizarding world needs you healthy, but more importantly you need to get well for your own sake. If you need anything from us or have any

questions regarding the coming year, send a message and we'll see to it." And to Harry's surprise she reached out and pulled him into a fierce hug. She whispered, "God bless you, Harry, and thank you." Then she held him at arms length and said more clearly. "Now get yourself home, the last carriage is waiting for you, but don't rush."

Harry gave her a crooked smile and when she let him go he turned and made his way to the front door and the carriage that would take him 'home' at last.

Harry's Future, part 2

Harry was sitting in his accustomed place for a warm summer day at the Burrow. A comfortable if somewhat worn chaise lounge was positioned to catch the morning and early afternoon sun but avoid the more intense late afternoon heat. After the first two weeks at his new 'home' Doctor Elsewhere from St. Mungo's had been out to see him and was satisfied enough with Harry's recovery that he allowed him an hour in the morning and again in the afternoon for walks in the fields and nearby woods but at a measured pace and no extracurricular activities. He was still strictly forbidden to fly his broom or engage in any manner of magic. In fact, his wand, which he hadn't seen since his collapse, had been 'confiscated' and was being held in trust by persons unknown, according to Mrs. Weasley. Harry suspected that it was safely locked away in Dumbledore's office. Truth be told, he wasn't particularly concerned about it. It would only be a temptation if it was around and he was honest enough with himself to know where he stood where temptations were concerned.

So Harry sat and rested after his latest afternoon walk, the sun just passing behind a large tree on the edge of the garden so that cooling shade was now enveloping his chair. With his eyes closed he could hear the rustling of the garden gnomes in the hedges on the garden perimeter and the swooshing of Ginny zipping back and forth over the fields surrounding the Burrow. Harry's Firebolt was likewise under wraps to avoid any interruptions in his recovery. As promised, Harry was prepared to get Ginny a new broom to replace the one lost to the school 'goon' squad. After several days of intense negotiations, Harry finally persuaded Ginny that it was okay to accept such an expensive present based on 'accumulated past opportunities lost'. Harry was especially proud of this line of reasoning. They had agreed on a Nimbus 2001, the same type that Harry had lost to the Whomping Willow several years ago. It was still a top notch broom outclassed only by the Firebolt that Harry owned and the rumored Firebolt II, "Potter Special Edition" that was due for release early next year. Harry was a bit dubious about the rumor since no one had come to him to ask for permission to use his name but he wasn't going to worry about it at this point. All he had to do was close his eyes and remember the look on Ginny's face when the new broom arrived and

the long breathless dissertation she delivered on the broom's virtues after her first long test flight.

The last swish was lower and louder followed by a rustle of grass as she brought the broom in for a landing. She rushed over and knelt on the grass next to Harry. Her face was flushed and her smile was broad.

"Oh, Harry. I just can't get over how great this broom is. It's so fast and turns on a knut. I almost threw myself off twice," She was laughing.

Harry chuckled and added,

"Don't let your mum hear that. But I know what you mean; I almost came adrift a few times on mine."

"The thing is, Harry, it's fun zipping and zooming around but it's not really helping me get ready for this year's team. I need to be working with a quaffle. I had so hoped you'd be able to practice with me."

"Yeah, it has been pretty inconvenient. I can't even stand on the ground and throw you the quaffle, you'd be too low. If I could use magic it would be easy but....wait a minute, I've had a thought."

He looked toward the house and said,

"Kreacher, I need to speak to you, please."

There was a pop as the house elf appeared at Harry's side.

"Yes, Master Harry. What may Kreacher do for Master Harry?"

"Kreacher, I'd like you to help me with something if you would. I want to help Ginny practice for Quidditch but since I can't fly or use magic to toss the quaffle high enough I can't do much. Would you mind using your magic to throw the ball high enough so Ginny can practice catching and throwing it while flying."

“Kreacher has never done such a thing before but as the red haired one named Ginny is special to Master Harry, Kreacher will do as asked. When the young mistress is ready?”

“Thanks, Kreacher. Thanks, Harry,” Ginny said as she bounced up, planted a kiss on Harry’s cheek and then mounted her broom and zoomed into the afternoon sky.

With a wave of his long fingered hand Kreacher sent the battered quaffle zooming into the air. Ginny was a red tipped blur as she pursued and captured the large ball. For the next two hours, with suggestions from Harry and his own developing sense of how this part of the game was played, Kreacher had the ball zipping around the sky, putting Ginny through a rigorous work out. She finally came in for a landing as the sun was just beginning to touch the horizon. Her face was flushed but she was grinning from ear to ear.

“Wow, that’s the best work out I think I’ve ever had, Harry. Thank you so much, Kreacher. You really had me working up there. Budge up there, Harry. I need to sit down.”

“Kreacher is pleased to have been of service to Mistress Ginny. If Master Harry has no need of Kreacher now may Kreacher return to helping Mrs. Weasley?”

“Of course, Kreacher. Thank you very much. Maybe we’ll do some more tomorrow.”

“As Master Harry wishes,” Kreacher replied then he bowed a bit to Ginny. “Mistress Ginny.”

“Kreacher, you don’t have to call me Mistress, you know,” Ginny said.

“Kreacher also practices for the future,” and he disappeared.

Ginny giggled and flushed. Harry smiled at what Kreacher had implied. He looked at Ginny as she perched on the edge of the chaise lounge and nodded slightly at the thought. He shifted sideways a bit more and he gave Ginny a gentle tug by the hand so that she slipped down to lie cuddled up at his side. Her flaming red hair was pressed

against his cheek with her head resting on his shoulder. Harry thought he could easily go through life like this.

“Promise me something, Harry.”

“What’s that?”

“Whatever happens to us in the future, we’ll always take time to do this. Just be together somewhere quiet.”

“I promise.”

They rested there a few more minutes and then heard Mrs. Weasley call them into dinner. Ginny was the first to rise. She did so a little slowly as the fatigue of her workout began to settle in. She offered Harry her hands and helped pull him up off the lounge chair. Hand-in-hand they walked into the house that meant home to Harry now and for the rest of his life.

Much of the summer passed in similar fashion. Harry went on his morning and afternoon walks, always with Ginny, sometimes with Ron, Bill or some other member of the Weasley clan along. Bill would take these opportunities to discuss his ideas for the coming year with Harry and by the end of July they had a very comprehensive plan of study drawn up for Professor McGonagall’s review. Two events of note did take place that altered the status quo if only for a short time. The first was during the fourth week after the closing of school. Visitors arrived at the Burrow in a most unusual fashion, by car. Around midday on Wednesday of the week a small four door sedan drove down the dirt road that led to the Burrow and pulled to a halt in front. The first out was none other then Hermione Granger who bolted from the rear seat behind the driver and rushed to meet those who gathered at the front door at the sound of the approaching vehicle. She flew into Harry’s arms and nearly knocked him off his feet. She was crying and laughing at the same time and managed to stutter out how glad she was to see him looking so well and thanking him for helping her bring her parents home.

Speaking of parents, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, the husband and wife dentists, emerged from the car and slowly proceeded up the walkway

in their daughter's tumultuous wake. Mrs. Weasley came forward and gave each of them a hug, having met them several times over the past seven years on buying trips to Diagon Alley just before the start of new school years. By this time Ginny and Hermione were exchanging embraces and Mrs. Weasley took charge by shoos them all indoors. They moved into the kitchen since it provided the most number of seats in the smallish house. Before settling at the table Mr. and Mrs. Granger both took the opportunity to thank Harry for his generosity. Mr. Granger was first.

"Thank you, Harry. I'm not sure what to say but after what Hermione has told us, about all you went through and then to help us like this, thank you is about all I can think of." He looked a little embarrassed.

"That's right, Harry," Mrs. Granger added, "but I can add this."

She then stepped forward and wrapped Harry in a hug and whispered in his ear. She then released him and stepped back smiling. Harry's face had gone red but he was smiling as well.

"Your thanks are more than enough, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. That money was worth very little compared to what Hermione has given me over the years with her friendship and support. I doubt I'll ever be able to repay her for that, but this was a good start. It's good to see you home."

Mrs. Weasley, who was near to bursting with motherly pride for her 'adopted' son, said,

"Yes, well, let's all sit down and have some refreshments and you can tell us all about your adventure in bringing them home, Hermione. I think I'll send messages to Mr. Weasley and Ron, they'll want to be here too I suspect, especially Ron."

The last was said with a wink toward Hermione, who went bright red in the face. Everyone laughed. It was for Harry a very happy afternoon. Hermione regaled them with the story of her flight to Australia, removing the spell from her parents and the long explanation about how they got there and why. Next came several weeks to wrap up their affairs in their temporary home and arrange

for the flight home and then several more days to get things back to normal at their real home. Hermione then sat both embarrassed and gratified at everyone's comments about how resourceful and clever she was to have protected her parents so well. She lost control for a moment when Harry added quietly, as he often did at his most serious,

"One thing I know and will never forget. I never would have made it without Hermione, especially this last year. She's just as responsible for Voldemort's defeat as I ever was."

With tears in her eyes she bolted up from her seat and ran over and pulled Harry into a hug as he sat next to Ginny who put her arms around both Harry and Hermione.

"Well," said Mr. Granger. "Whatever else this demon may have done, it appears he helped forge some lifelong friendships." This was greeted with universal agreement.

By mid afternoon, the messages had been received and Ron, Mr. Weasley and Percy had arrived. Bill sent back that he and Fleur would be able to make it in time for dinner. Within moments Ron and Hermione were sitting off in a corner alone becoming reacquainted and Mr. Granger was giving Mr. Weasley a tour of his car, the wizard dad having lost none of his enthusiasm for muggle gadgetry. Since the number of people had grown to exceed the capacity of the kitchen, dinner that evening was set up in the yard under a warm summer evening sky, much as it had several years ago before the Quidditch World Cup match. Bill, Fleur and George arrived in time for dinner and it was the happiest time they had all had in quite awhile.

Another major event of that summer occurred the following week and was not nearly as upbeat but just as important. A visitor arrived dressed in the garb of a St. Mungo's wizard and announced he was there to see Harry at the request of the Hospital's chief administrator at the suggestion of the Acting Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"My name is Dr. Medford. I'm the head of the Neurological Studies Department at St. Mungo's. I'm here to help Harry deal with his

dreams. He should be nearing the end of his use of Professor Slughorn's potion and we must find a more permanent solution. May I see him?"

"Yes, indeed, Doctor," Mrs. Weasley replied nervously, "he's resting in the back yard. If you'd follow me please? The healer followed Mrs. Weasley through the house and out into the backyard. Ginny and Harry were sitting at a small table playing a game of cards. Since even Exploding Snap was considered a prohibited activity under the 'No Magic' orders, Harry had taught Ginny how to play Gin Rummy. She was a quick study and was in the process of giving Harry a right drubbing. Mrs. Weasley introduced the healer to Harry and Ginny and then shooed Ginny into the house, the both of them looking rather apprehensive.

Harry looked at the healer. He was a tall thin man, well into his sixties. His thin gray hair was cut short and revealed a great deal of his scalp. His eyes were likewise gray and very serious. The healer returned his gaze and gave a small half smile.

"Harry, I'm here to help you get your dreams under control. Since your collapse you've been relying on the potion provided by Professor Slughorn. It's a good remedy in the short term but you can't rely on it forever. It will become less effective over time and can have some unpleasant side effects if used too much. Not the least of which is the loss of dreams altogether. We need to have dreams now and again, Harry. They have many benefits. Now, first things first. Please describe for me in detail the dream you had the night of your collapse."

Harry paused, took a deep breath and then recalled as best he could the scenario that had played out in his subconscious mind that fateful night. The healer listened carefully but said nothing. When Harry was done the wizard then said,

"Now, please describe, as best you can recall, what actually happened."

Harry then proceeded to describe the actual events of the day Voldemort was overthrown. The healer nodded here and there, his

eyes never leaving Harry's face. When Harry concluded Doctor Medford nodded once, then closed his eyes and remained so for several minutes. When he opened them he reached forward and placed his hand on the side of Harry's head, his thumb on Harry's temple and his fingertips at the back of the skull. Harry could hear him mumbling something under his breath and felt a tingle in his scalp. The healer's eyes opened and he pulled back his hand. He again nodded to himself and said,

"Here is what I believe happened, Harry, and will happen again if we don't fix things. I am well aware of your association with the one named Riddle. While you have been convalescing here with the Weasleys I have been conducting a great deal of research, interviewing friends of yours, members of the faculty and staff at Hogwarts, including a very revealing afternoon with the portrait of Albus Dumbledore."

Harry started at the naming of his lost mentor.

"Oh, yes, Harry. It has been a busy few weeks for me, but glad I am to have had the chance. So, here we are. When you were first attacked by Riddle when you were but a year old, the ancient magic invoked by your mother's selfless sacrifice to try, and succeed, in saving you not only crushed Riddle into near nothingness, it imparted a piece of him into you. I know you are aware of this since you came to understand you were his last Horcrux. So you shared in some of Riddle's powers, such as being a Parseltongue as well as being able to see into his mind as had happened on occasion. You also shared in his strength. It is my understanding Harry that you are regarded by your instructors and your mentor, Dumbledore, as one of the most gifted wizards in many, many years. This is a result no doubt of your being born of two very gifted wizards in their own right, but bolstered by the effects of the run in with Riddle."

Harry was shocked at this assessment and it showed on his face.

"Do not doubt this, Harry. All the signs were there for anyone to see if they hadn't all been distracted by the events that surrounded you."

"I don't understand, Dr. Medford. So much of what I did was from luck or from someone else doing things for me." Harry was thinking of the interference during the TriWizards cup in particular.

"No, Harry. In the end, all of those things occurred through you. It was the execution of those many difficult tasks that demonstrated your abilities. Perhaps they even helped polish those skills. Adversity is often the best teacher. But nonetheless, part of that power was Riddle's, torn from him and deposited in you at that fateful moment almost seventeen years ago. But to the point; part of what Riddle was, a very small part, rests with you still."

Once more Harry started horrified by the thought that some vestige of the most evil wizard in memory could still be alive in him.

"Calm yourself, Harry. As I said, it is a small part. When I had my hand on your head I was searching for it. It took some time for as I said it was very small and hiding away, deep in your subconscious. Much too small to be able to affect you during your waking hours but just enough to seek to harm you when you are most vulnerable, when you are asleep. The potion blocks it from doing any harm, but as I said earlier, for other reasons you must stop using the potion. It is this little part of Riddle that I believe caused your dream, Harry. It twisted what was real into what it wanted to be real, to hurt you in the only way it could. I had my suspicions but my examination has confirmed them. What we will do is work so that you will be able to use your remarkable strength of self and will power to take control even as you sleep and conquer what is left of Riddle. Do you understand me?"

"Are you saying I have to kill Voldemort all over again, in my mind?"

"Not kill, Harry, defeat. What is left of Riddle is a thought, a remnant of mind, not unlike the sixteen year old essence that had been left in that old school book. Yes, Harry, I know about all your adventures," the older man said with a smile. "It can't be killed as such but defeated, diminished and locked away so that it can't come out to cause you anymore trouble."

"Yes, sir, I think I understand."

“Very good. The first step will be for you to spend some time during each of the next three days, replaying the actual events and the nightmare events in your mind. I know it may be unpleasant for you, Harry, but it’s very necessary. You must fix very firmly in your mind the differences. What are the things that Riddle is trying to change so that he can punish you for destroying him. I will be back on the fourth day and we will begin the actual treatment. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir, I can.”

“Good man. Then I will leave you here. I wish to take my leave of Mrs. Weasley and I will see you in four days time.”

Doctor Medford stood up and offered Harry his hand. Harry stood and shook it and watched the healer walk away and into the house. One thing that hadn’t changed in all this time was Harry’s curiosity. He walked quietly up to the door and tried to hear anything that was said,

“Thank you for coming, Doctor. We all appreciate what you’re trying to do for Harry.”

“It is my privilege, Mrs. Weasley. He is a truly remarkable young wizard. There is a great deal of power there but also an incredible strength of will. It really is no surprise that he’s endured all he has. I dare say most others would have broken. He puts me in mind of Albus Dumbledore in that respect.”

Harry almost fell over backward when he heard that.

“Yes, Doctor, we’ve always thought there was something special about him. We’ll look forward to seeing you in a few days then.”

He was slowly walking back towards the table when Ginny came quietly out of the door and walked up next to him and took his hand in hers. He looked over at her and smiled a bit.

“Would you like to take our walk now, Harry?”

“Hmm, yes, a good idea.”

Ginny smiled back but she was a very insightful young lady and she knew this would be a silent walk. At dinner that night Bill and Fleur were there. With some prodding from Ginny, Harry revealed the details of his discussion with the Doctor. When he was done Fleur reached across the table and took his hand,

“Mon dieu, even dead, that ‘orrible creature reaches out to torment our brave ‘arry. Will eet never end?”

“The Doctor Medford believes it will, Fleur. He’s sure he can show me how to bottle him up and stick him away so that he can’t do me any more harm. There might even be some justice in it really. A little bit of him tucked away, knowing he’s beaten, watching as we live happier lives and there isn’t a thing he can do to ruin it,” and he smiled a little.

Fleur squeezed his hand tighter and smiled at him through watery eyes. They finished their meal and Harry excused himself saying he needed to start preparing for when the healer returned. He went up to the bedroom he was sharing with Ron and stretched out on the bed. With his eyes closed he began to recall the actual events of that momentous day only a few weeks past, trying to recall exactly what was said, who said it, where people were and what things they did. Considering his condition at the time he was surprised at how the details seemed to fill themselves in, perhaps having been stored in some part of his subconscious mind waiting for recall. Once he was comfortable with the idea that he had things pretty well set he began the unpleasant task of calling up what he could remember of the nightmare. How Neville had been destroyed, the evil beings flooding the grounds, the damage to the castle and helpless rage as he tried to convince everyone he was dead. The effort left him in a cold sweat. He opened his eyes to see that night had fallen. He stood up and made his way to the window to catch a breath of the warm night air scented with flowers and see the stars shining so brightly. He could hear that Bill and Fleur were still downstairs and that Mr. Weasley and Percy had arrived from the Ministry. He took a further deep breath and left the room and went downstairs.

“Hello, Harry,” Mr. Weasley called out. “Everything alright?”

“Yes, sir. I was just working on what Dr. Medford wanted me to do. Recalling the nightmare left me a little out of sorts. I thought I’d come down before Bill and Fleur left. I don’t think I’d want to go to sleep right after all that.”

“A very good idea, Harry.”

Harry took a seat next to Ginny who pulled his arm around her shoulder and pushed in close to him to offer her support. Fleur came over and sat down next to him and took his free hand in both of hers and gave him a small smile. Bill looked at Harry and a smirk creased his scarred face,

“If any of your school mates could see you now, Harry, they’d be burning up with envy.”

Fleur and Ginny looked at each other, laughed and then each planted a big kiss on Harry’s cheeks. He turned bright red, prompting laughter from everyone in the room. They passed a couple of pleasant hours chatting about a number of things, including progress at the Ministry, ideas for Bill and Harry’s teaching plans and Ginny’s increasing skill level as a chaser.

“Between the Nimbus 2001 and the way Kreacher has me flying all across the sky I think I should be in great shape for the start of term. You know, Harry, if Kreacher winds up following you to Hogwarts, he could really help out with team practices you know. He’s developing a real knack for making you stretch that little extra to make plays.”

“I hadn’t really thought about that, Ginny. I don’t even know if I’m allowed to have a house elf at school. Guess I’ll have to send an owl to Professor McGonagall and ask about it.”

Bill and Fleur finally had to leave for the evening. Bill shook Harry’s hand and said he was going to drop by a packet later in the week for him to go over and Fleur gave him her now customary embrace and kiss on the cheek.

“Sleep well, mon ami,” she said by way of farewell.

Ginny watched this with a curious expression on her face. As the rest of the family began to make their way to their respective rooms, Ginny took hold of Harry's hand and held him back. He turned to face her with a questioning glance.

"Harry, I know I don't have anything to worry about and Fleur is completely devoted to Bill, but I can't help wonder about how she's been behaving towards you in the past weeks. I mean I know you were on good terms after the tournament and all but..."

Harry smiled at the redheaded beauty that stood in front of him and he pulled her toward him and held her tight. He then proceeded to explain to her what Fleur had revealed to him on that fateful night. How ashamed she had been at how she treated Harry, about how she had come to admire him and in a way come to accept him as family and as a friend.

"I think Fleur is one of those people that once she takes you in there's no half way. I think there's a very strong mothering instinct there, too. I'm a very lucky fellow, I think. I lost my real mother before I knew her and I grew up an orphan in a family I can't ever really think of as family. Now, I have the girl of my dreams, a big sister who would probably fight a dementor for me and the best mum around."

Harry felt Ginny's grip on him intensify and her body shudder a bit. When he felt her relax he pushed her back to arms length so he could look into her face. Her eyes were misted and her chin trembled a bit.

"I hope those are happy tears."

She nodded her head vigorously, pulled him to her for one more hug then hand-in-hand they went up the stairs, he to his room, and she to hers.

Over the next three days Harry took time to do more of the memory recall and by the third day he was sure he could pick out who was wearing what and exactly what had been said at any point in both the real event and the nightmare. On the morning of the fourth day, Dr. Medford had arrived at the front door of the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley led him into the kitchen where Harry sat at the table with Ginny helping

Mrs. Weasley prepare vegetables for the evening dinner. Harry knew this was busywork to keep him occupied until the healer had arrived.

“Good morning, Harry. Are you ready?”

“I think so, sir. I have the details of both scenarios pretty well fixed in my mind like you said.”

“Very good. What do you say we go out into the yard? It’s fairly quiet and comfortable and that will help make it easier to do what we need to get done.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry stood and led the way out into the yard. The healer indicated he should use the chaise lounge. Harry did so and lay back, his hands folded at his waist. Doctor Medford pulled up another old chair and sat next to him.

“Alright, Harry. Now, the basic idea is for you to take the image of what you know actually happened and superimpose it on the nightmare that you had. In order to do that you have to actually experience the nightmare. I know it won’t be pleasant but it is necessary. I can help you do that. I will help you slip into a sleep like state. Then I will help trigger the nightmare.”

“Is this like hypnosis?”

“On the surface it does appear similar, Harry. But what the muggles call hypnosis puts you in the hands of the hypnotist. What we are doing puts, or hopes to put, you in control. You must experience the nightmare yet become separate from it. You must observe it from outside. When you can do that, you can then take the image of reality and force it into the nightmare. Replace the false with the true. Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“Alright, Harry. Now close your eyes and relax. Trust me and trust in yourself that no harm can befall you here.”

The healer reached out and placed his hand alongside Harry's head as he done several days earlier. Harry could feel a different kind of tingle this time and he felt himself beginning to drift as if he had no weight. He could hear a faint murmur on the edge of hearing but he couldn't understand any of it. The darkness behind his eyes began to lighten and once again he was on the ground in the dark forest and he was being picked up by Hagrid. As he watched the scenario unfold he remembered that he needed to step outside the dream, to watch it and not to be part of it. It was not easy for as he tried to step away something tried to pull him back. But he was proving the stronger and by the time his limp form was laid out in front of the school his view was actually from behind and above as if a part of him was floating in the air or more likely hovering on his broom. He began to gather himself to push this nightmare aside in favor of what he knew to be real when he was suddenly struck from behind by something hard and hot. He felt himself plummeting to the ground. He started awake before he hit. He felt damp and clammy and then he turned to look at Doctor Medford.

"Tell me what happened, Harry."

"Things started out the way I remembered and I remembered what you said about having to observe the dream, not participate, so I started to pull away and I could feel something tugging at me to keep me in the dream. I just kept pulling and eventually I got to where I was above and behind Voldemort's forces. It was like I was floating or maybe hovering on my broom. Then I got hit hard from behind by something hot and I started to fall. I woke up before I hit the ground."

"Interesting. Actually Harry, you've had a very good start. That you were able to separate your consciousness from your dream so well on the first attempt is quite remarkable. As to what happened I think the first was that the remnant of Riddle was attempting to hold you in the nightmare. Obviously he wasn't successful. The second appears to be this. While you were able to become an observer within the dream, that wasn't sufficient. You were likely hit by a fireball or similar spell thrown by one of Riddle's supporters in the dream. You must take yourself completely outside it as if you were watching a performance. I'd say a play perhaps but that's not quite right since

you are still in the audience near to the action.” The healer groped for the proper analogy.

“I think you mean like a television show or movie. What’s going on happened somewhere and somewhen else and you’re just watching a recording of it.”

“Precisely, Harry. Very good. Do you think you can do that?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Excellent, let’s try again.”

Once more Harry laid back on the lounge and closed his eyes. He felt the healer’s touch and the faint tingle and heard the murmur. Once more the darkness behind his eyes lifted and as it started to come into focus Harry concentrated on the idea of watching a TV show as if it was on the big set in the living room of the Dursleys’ house those times he would sneak down and watch from the hallway. The image in the dark forest came into focus but appeared further away and as if from behind a sheet of glass, as if it was on a TV screen. He watched as he was lifted up and carried to the front of the castle and as the bogus confrontation began with the death and destruction, a show he knew the Dursleys’ would never allow in their oh-so-proper home. Harry knew he needed to change the scene to make it the real one. But how? Then it struck him. What did Uncle Vernon do at a time like this? It was so simple Harry laughed inside his head. His observer self walked into the spectral living room, approached the TV he was never, ever allowed to come near and simply changed the channel. He saw the screen flicker and the image changed several times until it came to rest on the all news channel. He called up what he knew happened that day and the flickering screen settled on the front of the castle again and Harry watched briefly to assure himself that Neville did receive the sword and the people did come out of the town and the forces of Voldemort were defeated. Then with a little smile he switched off the set. As he began to emerge from the dream state he thought he heard an ever so faint howl of frustration but it faded before he could be sure.

“Harry, how did it go this time? I felt some strange sensations and couldn’t quite follow what was happening.”

Harry explained how he put together the visualization of watching the TV show and changing the channel and then switching off the set. He saw the older man’s face slowly shift into a smile, then a chuckle and then a full loud laugh.

“That was brilliant, Harry. Your life as a muggle provided you with the perfect analogy to handle a quite complex situation in a very simple manner. I was expecting to spend hours trying to walk you through this step by step. I fully expect we are done with this, but in case I am wrong, when you sleep tonight make sure you remember you can take control of your subconscious mind this way and prevent any further disturbances.”

“Thank you, Doctor Medford.”

As Harry and Doctor Medford stood up, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny came out into the yard. They both looked anxious.

“No need to worry, ladies. This remarkable young man has done in a matter of moments what I thought would take hours. I suspect he’s got the situation fully under control. If I’m in error and you need me, just send a message to St. Mungo’s and I will be right here.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” replied Mrs. Weasley.

“Yeah, thanks, Dr. Medford. I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“You’re welcome, Harry, but it’s small recompense for what you have done for all of us. I’m only too glad to help and it’s been a fascinating case to study as a healer as well.”

With a wave he took a few steps away and then Disapparated. Ginny came over and gave Harry a hug.

“So you’re all cured then, Harry?” she asked.

“Of the dreams, maybe, I’ll find out soon enough. But as to the rest I doubt it and I’m not about to try and find that out until I get the all clear from St. Mungo’s.”

“Too right you aren’t, young fellow me lad,” admonished Mrs. Weasley. “As far as I’m concerned you are still under strict orders and nothing changes. No magic, no flying and no serious exertion. So go take your walk, you two and then come back for lunch.”

Harry’s mood was the best it had been in days. The young couple walked hand in hand along the dusty road leading away from the Burrow; they stopped to look at flowers or to watch as a rabbit darted across their path. They walked beneath the shade of tall trees and talked about small matters. They stopped to rest beneath a large oak tree, Harry sitting with his back to the tree, Ginny sitting in front of him with her back against his chest. They enjoyed this time in silence, wrapping themselves in the calm of a warm summer day far from any concern other than just being. Eventually Harry leaned forward and whispered in Ginny’s ear,

“I think your mum will be expecting us back soon.”

“Hmm, I suppose you’re right. I am getting a bit hungry but it’s just so peaceful here. But first things first, Mr. Potter.”

“What’s that, Miss Weasley?”

She pivoted about and when they came face to face she brought her lips to his and let them linger there for several long breathless moments. Harry was all too willing to return the favor and reveled in the sensations. Ginny broke the contact reluctantly and then slowly rose, offering her hands to help Harry up. They strolled along arm in arm at the same leisurely pace and had just come out onto the road again when Ginny let out with a contented little sigh.

“You know, Harry, I’m a very lucky girl.”

“Why’s that?”

"It's not every girl whose true love is also her hero."

"I'm your hero?"

"Well, of course you are. I bet you're a lot of people's hero. But you've been mine ever since that day in Slytherin's lair when you were ready to die to save me."

"Even when you were dating those other guys?"

"You dope, you know I was dating them because you couldn't make up your mind about, well, about anything. I was just biding my time is all."

"Well this hero stuff is all well and good but that sort of thing can go to a fellow's head. I would appreciate it if you keep an eye on me in the future and remind me of when the Famous Harry Potter is becoming the Fat Headed Harry Potter," the last was said with a smile.

"Hmm, seems to me I've missed my chance a few times then," she said with a laugh and then when she saw Harry's look of mock outrage she reached up to kiss him on the cheek. "Teasing you, silly."

"I should hope so," Harry said then laughed.

Nothing of any importance intruded on the extended Weasley family, including any nasty dreams, until the first weekend in July when Charlie Weasley paid his promised visit from Romania. He arrived early on Saturday morning and was greeted with hugs and handshakes all around. It so happened that Mr. Weasley and Percy were enjoying their first Saturday off since the defeat of Voldemort and with a quick message dispatched, Bill and Fleur were there by mid morning allowing for the whole family to be together with one notable but unremarked upon exception. Charlie filled them in on his plans to defend his grant application to the Ministry of Magic's Magical Creatures department on Monday morning and if accepted he would be coming home to England for an extended period. There was also some discussion as to the opportunities that may present themselves since the 'cleansing' of the Ministry had left vacancies in every department.

“That’s a possibility, Dad, but I’m not sure I’m ready for that yet. I’m still a field researcher at heart and still have enough body parts left to be able to enjoy my work.”

The study of magical creatures was notoriously hard on the studier.

“Well, good luck to you anyway, son. It will be quite a feather in your cap one way or the other and it will be nice having you close to home for a while,” Mr. Weasley said.

Charlie then turned to Harry.

“I must say, Harry, you are looking in far better condition then when I last saw you. It seems life in the Burrow agrees with you.”

“It does, Charlie. It’s been the very best time of my life. The only thing that could make it better would be being able to use my broom to practice with Ginny. But I know...” he started as he saw Mrs. Weasley’s face start to cloud. “...that I can’t do that until I’m recovered so I’m okay with it.” He smiled at Mrs. Weasley who returned it with a slit eyed stare of warning.

“Yes, well, I can understand that. Um, Harry, I know I’m really stepping over the line but would you mind if I tried...” Charlie let the last trail off.

“Try my Firebolt? I’d be glad to, Charlie, but I have no idea where it is. I don’t even know if it’s here at the Burrow. I suspect it’s locked up with my wand somewhere.”

“It’s ok, Harry. It’s just I’ve heard such incredible things about them and I was hoping to try it out. Haven’t had the chance to do any fancy flying since I left Hogwarts.”

Harry recalled that on several occasions he was considered the equal or superior to the illustrious Charlie Weasley when it came to being a seeker. He could only give Charlie a sympathetic shrug.

“Oh, for goodness sake. You’re both look like a couple of lost kittens,” Mrs. Weasley burst out. She pulled out her well used wand and shouted,

“Accio Firebolt.”

To everyone’s amazement, but no more so then Harry, the sleek broom came rushing out from behind the house and came to rest next to Mrs. Weasley.

“Alright, you listen to me, you two. I was given Harry’s broom against the unthinkable possibility that some remaining Death Eaters or some such should attack Harry here at the Burrow and he would need to escape. The risk of injury in flying was considered less then him being cornered here. However, it was spelled so that only I could call it forth, as long as I was alive. If it’s alright with Harry you can fly it Charlie but when we are done it goes away again. Understand?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As Charlie took the current apex of broom technology into his burn scarred hands, Harry could only look on wistfully. With a lopsided grin Charlie mounted the broom and streaked skyward, hooting loudly. Ginny was still holding onto Harry’s arm and looked at him questioningly.

“Go ahead, love of my life. Give your brother a run for his money.”

He smiled at her lovingly. Ginny pulled out her wand and shouted, “Accio Nimbus” and in seconds her own sleek broom was in hand. She tucked away her wand and was soon rocketing skyward. The rest of the family settled down to watch as brother and sister chased each other across the sky. Charlie had lost little of his skill and the added boost from the Firebolt had him doing all manner of spectacular moves. Ginny was not far behind assisted by her lower body weight and reduced wind resistance. Out of no where a quaffle appeared in the sky and the two were soon racing about tossing and catching the ball with wild abandon. Harry looked over to see

Kreacher standing in the doorway of the house watching the two aerialists intently. Occasionally he would flick a finger and the ball would change direction in mid flight causing the two to abruptly change trajectories and dash after the falling orb. Fleur had come over to sit next to Harry.

“You weesh you were up there weeth them, don’t you, mon ami?”

Harry looked over at Fleur.

“Yes, I do but I know I can’t be for some very good reasons so I’m content to watch Charlie and Ginny have some fun.”

“Ah, ‘arry. Are you sure there are no others like you at ‘ome. I would weesh for a young man like you for my seester.”

Harry blushed to the roots of his unruly hair and Fleur laughed and kissed his cheek. Bill could only laugh and roll his eyes at Harry. They all continued to watch Ginny and Charlie tear across the sky for another half hour. When they came in for a landing their faces were flushed but split with wide grins and Charlie was laughing.

“My God, Harry. I can’t thank you enough for that. What an amazing ride. And Ginny, where did you learn to ride like that. I don’t remember you being that quick and agile last year.”

“Last year I didn’t have a Nimbus 2001 or Kreacher zooming me all over the sky.”

“You’re going to be near to impossible to outfly in competition. You going out for the Gryffindor team, Harry?”

“Up in the air right now, Charlie. Opps, didn’t mean it that way.” Everyone was laughing at Harry’s accidental pun. “I have to get cleared by St. Mungo’s at the end of the summer to see how much I can do when I get back to school. I’d love to play though.”

“Yes, well,” Mrs. Weasley cut in. “Harry has a way to go yet and a good lunch is just what the healer ordered so if you’d all come with me we’ll get it sorted out.”

Everyone pitched in and soon they were all tucking in to an excellent lunch. When they were finished Harry sat at the table looking thoughtful.

“Something wrong, Harry?” asked Mr. Weasley.

“Not wrong, but I think I need to talk to you, Mr. Weasley, in private if you don’t mind?”

“Of course, Harry. Come with me.”

Harry followed Mr. Weasley outside and toward the ramshackle shed that served as his workshop. In simpler times this was where he would work on his muggle gadgets to find out how they worked and then ‘enhance’ them with spells, like the ill fated flying Anglia. He motioned for Harry to take a seat on a rickety old stool near the workbench. Mr. Weasley leaned against a cabinet and said,

“Okay, Harry. What was it you wanted to talk about?”

”Um, I’m not sure how to say this but you know how much I appreciate all you and Mrs. Weasley have done for me, almost from the very beginning. Now this. It’s just that, well, I feel like I’m poncing and I can’t even cheat because I don’t have my wand or broom. I just lie around or go for walks and eat your food and don’t give anything back. It’s starting to bother me, I guess.”

Mr. Weasley looked at Harry for a moment, his face somber. He let out a slow breath and then said,

“My first reaction, Harry, is to tell you that you’re being ridiculous. That there isn’t a family in the wizarding world that wouldn’t bend over backwards to do for you what we are doing.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I can think of one or three at the moment,” Harry said with a smirk.

“I meant families on the right side of the line, Harry. Be that as it may, it’s not what I am going to say. I’ve know you long enough to know

that you are incapable of claiming any privilege for yourself. We are both aware that your dad had some issues with ego when he was a young fellow but you never went in that direction. So I guess all this is hard for you to accept. But accept it you will, young man. You very nearly killed yourself to deliver us from the worst evil to come our way in ages. You need to heal and get well again. You have set a difficult path for yourself to become an Auror and continue to fight against the dark arts. So if you find it hard to accept the gratitude and love of those who care about you, perhaps you can accept the idea that you need to prepare yourself for the long, difficult road that you've set for yourself."

Mr. Weasley was standing across from Harry, his arms crossed, his expression serious.

"I didn't mean it that way, Mr. Weasley. I just feel so bloody useless."

"Harry, when are you going to get it into your head that you've been more useful in the last seven years, particularly this past year, than a dozen other wizards combined could hope to be in a lifetime. You deserve a little useless time and this is it. So I suggest you make the best of it because in a couple of months you are going to be up to your neck in work and looking back on this summer as the calm before the storm. So shake off whatever mood you're in and plan on having as good a summer as your situation allows. You are getting the same treatment as any one of my sons would get because that's how we feel about you around here. So, son, get up off your bum, and go back inside and act like a member of the family, which means eat too much and aggravate your mother, understood?"

"Yes, sir. I guess I am being a bit of a prat after all. I guess I'm just not used to being part of a real family."

He gave Mr. Weasley a little smile and walked out of the shed. Mr. Weasley watched him as he left, shaking his head, thinking about what a confused young man Harry could be.

As the weeks of July approached their end, and Harry's eighteenth birthday, an air of excitement began to build at the Burrow. Harry had a suspicion that the Weasleys' were planning something special for

him and he was genuinely curious about what it would be and, he admitted to himself, happy that someone was preparing to make a fuss about it. Harry had not had much luck with birthdays in the past, thanks to the Dursleys. What did concern him was the idea that the Weasley's might be spending money they really couldn't afford. He would have to think of a way to repay them for all their kindnesses over the years without it causing friction between him and his 'adopted' parents. He would have to think on it.

One thing that Harry had noticed was a growing sense of restlessness. In the early phase of his recovery, his lack of energy made his restrictions easy to accept. But now as his health improved and some measure of vitality was making itself felt, he grew more restive. His walks were longer and he tended to move at a faster pace than Ginny thought was appropriate. Neither of them wanted it to become a source of discord so Ginny held back any comments and Harry found himself holding back which meant he didn't burn off the excess energy by day's end. Sleep was a little harder to come by. Shortly before his birthday an answer of sorts presented itself. Harry received by school owl an envelope containing several sheets of parchment. One was a short message from Professor McGonagall wishing him good health and indicating that requirements for the NEWTs he would need had been reviewed and the books selected. The list of books, materials and supplies was enclosed. She wished him good luck for the remainder of the summer and she looked forward to his return to Hogwarts on the first day of September. He looked at the list and found it to be the most extensive he had ever seen. There were a full dozen books, an extensive list of potion supplies, and additional equipment that was required. He went to find Mrs. Weasley.

"Mrs. Weasley, I just got my list of books and stuff I need for the next school year. I know it doesn't really sound like me, but I'd like to get the books as early as I can. If I'm going to have a whole month with nothing to do, I might as well get a head start."

"Let me see what you have there, Harry."

As she perused the list her brows knotted and she pursed her lips.

"This is quite an arm load, Harry. Maybe even two or three. It's obvious no one person could pick up all this. And you can't go to Diagon Alley by Apparation or using floo powder. I'll talk to Arthur and see if we can get a Ministry car to take us to London. I dare say they wouldn't mind. Leave it to me, Harry."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She was as good as her word and on the morning of the second day a large four door sedan pulled up in front of the Burrow and a wizard in a plain black muggle suit got out. Harry, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley got into the car and the driver closed the door for them. He backed the car around and set off down the country lane. It wasn't all that much later that the car pulled up in front of the Leaky Cauldron. Once more the uncanny ability of the Ministry cars to move through traffic made the trip quick and uneventful. The driver opened the door and held it while the three passengers climbed out onto the sidewalk. They all approached the door and the dark suited driver held up a hand signaling the others to wait. He ducked his head inside, paused for a moment and then with a wave of his hand ushered them through the door. As Mrs. Weasley passed him he said in a quiet voice,

"The car will be waiting for you here, ma'am, when you're finished."

"Thank you, very much."

As Harry's eyes grew accustomed to the light he could see that the main room was very nearly deserted. One person he did recognize was Tom, the innkeeper. He scuttled up to the three, bobbing his head.

"An honor it is to see you, Mr. Potter, and looking so well. We were told you'd be coming today. Not many people as you see, business has still been a little slow but I expect it will pick up as the start of school approaches. Allow me to escort you folks to the portal."

Harry knew the way all too well and that Mrs. Weasley and Ginny could find it in their sleep but he also knew that Tom was just trying to be polite and storing up a story for when the tap room was full and he could tell how he had been able to talk to the Famous Harry Potter.

Harry restrained himself from laughing or shaking his head. He could sense Ginny looking at him and when he turned his head to look at her she rolled her eyes a bit and giggled under her breath. She reached for Harry's hand and when he took it he got the same thrill he always did when her warm hand took hold of his. Tom took them out the back door and even tapped the proper bricks with his wand to open the portal. He waved them through.

"Would you folks be interested in lunch before you return home today?" Tom asked.

"What do you think, children? Lunch at the Cauldron today?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Ginny and Harry both replied "Yes, ma'am" in unison and Harry added,

"It will be my treat."

"Oh, no, Mr. Potter, I couldn't possibly charge you for a simple meal."

"Tom, we'll discuss that when the check comes," Harry said with a grin.

"As you say, Mr. Potter."

The three shoppers stepped through the portal onto Diagon Alley and noticed that there weren't as many people as they usually saw. Those that were there seemed in good spirits but many looked like they had fallen on hard times. Harry was genuinely dismayed at the state of the street. Several stores were still boarded up including his favorite ice cream shop. Harry looked around and his gaze crossed Mrs. Weasley.

"Aye, Harry. It will be some time before all of the damage to our community has been repaired. It will never be the same but it will get better. The Ministry has confiscated the holdings of many of Voldemort's followers on the basis that their fortunes were founded on illegal and evil means. The money is being distributed to those who lost what they had to that evil fiend's depredations."

It was taking Harry some time to absorb it all. He remembered he had heard that when Voldemort's followers had seized control people had disappeared, stores were closed and property confiscated but this was the first time he had seen the results. In the mean time people on the streets were beginning to recognize him and some waved or called out their greetings or thanks. Most simply stood and stared as if awestruck. An elderly witch in thread bare robes shuffled up to stand within a few feet of Harry and reached out to take his hand. Harry reached with his free hand to take one of hers and she laid her other hand over the top and bowed her head over them. When she looked up there were tears running down her cheeks but her mouth was turned up in a small smile. In a voice barely above a whisper she said,

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, thank you."

Harry's heart was breaking. These people were all his family in a manner of speaking and they had suffered so much. This witch had lived through both of Voldemort's attempts to take over the wizarding world and was probably old enough to remember Grindelwald. His eyes began to mist and before he knew what he was doing he had let go of Ginny and had pulled the old woman into his arms and was holding on to her and telling her that things would get better and life would be good again. Mrs. Weasley put her arm around Ginny's shoulders and held her tight as they watched Harry comfort the elderly witch. Other people began to approach and soon Harry was shaking hands and giving and receiving hugs from all manner of witches and wizards. It reminded Harry of his first day at the Leaky Cauldron when all those strangers had come up to greet him. Now he realized that these people weren't strangers, but friends and family that he simply hadn't met yet. He felt an overwhelming need and desire to help them. Somehow he would. The thought that he had already helped them in a way that defied calculation never crossed his mind.

Perhaps a half an hour passed before the people seemed to realize it was time that Harry be allowed to go about his business. With final handshakes or touches the witches and wizards moved away still offering words of thanks, encouragement, and wishes of good health

and fortune. Harry watched them as they walked away, many looking over their shoulders at him, smiling one last time. He felt Ginny push her way into the circle of his arm and Mrs. Weasley laid a motherly hand on his shoulder. He gave Ginny a squeeze and he wrapped the other around Mrs. Weasley's lower back and pulled her close. Ginny looked up at him and said,

"I guess you're not just my hero, Harry."

Harry nodded a little and said,

"I think I'm beginning to understand things a little better now. I just hope I don't wind up disappointing everyone."

"Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley began, "If you remember to stay true to yourself and follow your feelings, I don't think you'll be able to. Now, what say we get down to business and take care of that list of yours? I think the first order of business is a trip to Gringotts for you."

"Yes, ma'am."

The three walked arm-in-arm to the Goblin bank that held most of the gold in Wizardom. The two Goblins on door duty bowed deeply and swung the doors in. The sounds of business diminished as both customers and tellers recognized Harry as he walked in. An elderly appearing Goblin rushed up to meet them.

"It is an honor to see you, Mr. Potter. How may we be of service?"

"I'd like to have an accounting of what I have here at the bank and make some transactions."

"Certainly, sir. If we are going to be discussing your account, I'm afraid we must do so in private, sir. Bank regulations, I'm afraid. The ladies may wait in our lounge area and refreshments may be had."

"That's quite alright, Harry. Ginny and I will be waiting for you when you're finished."

As a second goblin showed the Weasley women to the lounge, the first brought Harry to a private room and then signaled to a clerk. When the clerk arrived the older goblin issued instructions in their guttural tongue and then gestured for Harry to sit. In moments, the clerk returned with a large book, placed it on the table in front of Harry and opened it to the page for his account. Harry eyes began to wander down the somewhat confusing columns of numbers but the elder Goblin intervened.

"I believe the information you seek is shown here, Mr. Potter. The accounts were brought up to date just this past week and as you can see the figure is sizable."

Harry blinked and looked again. For a boy who had spent the first ten years of his life penniless and then knowing that he had substantial if somewhat ambiguous funds on deposit from what his parents had left him, what he was presented with now seemed beyond belief. Working his way backward he saw the withdrawal to cover the cost of Ginny's broom, the cost of Hermione's trip to Australia, the last one he made for school expenses and then the transfer of the assets from Sirius' account after he had died. This was the sum that staggered him. Sirius was the last of the Blacks and all of their assets had been left to him, whether he had wanted them or not. As Sirius' sole heir it was now his. The Goblin had dealt with humans for long enough to know their expressions.

"Yes, young sir, it is a substantial sum to say the least. In fact, if I may dare say, you now stand as one of our largest single accounts. It goes without saying that the bank stands ready to serve in whatever capacity we can."

Harry shook his head and looked at the goblin.

"I never suspected, not in my wildest dreams."

"One suspects that the young sir has had much more pressing matters on his mind."

It was impossible to tell if the goblin was making an attempt at humor or a simple statement.

"I guess you're right. Well, the first thing is I'd like to withdraw fifty galleons for personal expenses. Then I want one hundred galleons transferred to the account of Arthur and Molly Weasley." Harry felt this was far from sufficient but the most he could get them to accept at the moment. "Do you know what the Ministry of Magic is doing about the money they are distributing to help those ruined by Voldemort? I mean do they have a special fund set up or something?"

"Well, Mr. Potter, the Ministry has their treasury accounts set up here at Gringotts. We have an entire department that handles the transactions. May one ask what you have in mind?" the goblin asked.

"Yes, I want an anonymous donation of one thousand galleons to be placed in whatever account they are using for that purpose. Can you do it so they don't know where the money came from?"

The Goblin stroked his meager chin with a long fingered hand.

"We can arrange it so that only a few goblins in our accounting department know about it. And a goblin would rather die then reveal confidential banking information, Mr. Potter. Your secret is safe with us, I assure you. Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you very much. I suppose I better see about a new owl. I may need to send you further instructions."

"As you wish, young sir. Now, let us see about that withdrawal. If you would just sign here, I'll have the funds brought right away."

Harry signed the slip of paper and sat back and waited. In moments, the clerk goblin came back with a small leather pouch with a gold embossed 'G' on it. He poured the contents on the table in front of Harry, counted the coins for him and when Harry nodded his assent, swept the coins back into the pouch and handed it to him.

"A token from the bank, young sir. It can fit into the inside pocket of your robe or be attached to a belt."

"Thank you, very much."

“Oh no, young sir. Many thanks to you.”

They stood up and the elder goblin escorted him to where Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were sitting, enjoying a cup of tea and some biscuits. Mrs. Weasley looked up and saw them approaching,

“Harry, dear. I must say I could get used to this sort of treatment.”

“We’ll have to see what we can do about that, ma’am,” Harry said with a small smile.

Once more flanked by the Weasley women, Harry left the bank, the door Goblins once more bowing deeply before swinging the doors shut. Their first stop was Flourish and Blotts book shop where they spent the better part of an hour pulling together the books and supplemental materials on the list. Several of the books were not part of the normal curriculum and the shop clerk had to ferret around in several dusty stacks to come up with them. Harry paid for the books and for a few extra sickles arranged to have them brought to the common room of the Leaky Cauldron. Their next stop was the witches and wizards supply store where once again several unusual items required some searching in dusty corners or supply areas in the back of the store. The witch who ran the store raised an eyebrow when she saw what was being purchased but figured if the Famous Harry Potter was doing the asking then she would do her best to supply what was required. Their last stop was the magical creatures shop where Harry had the unenviable task of picking out a new owl. He knew that he would never be able to replace Hedwig as a friend and companion but he also realized that he needed one to help him communicate with friends and whatever business he needed to conduct. He settled upon a stately looking barn owl that had been regarding him ever since he entered the shop.

“An excellent choice, Mr. Potter. It is a wise wizard who realizes that it is the animal that makes the best choice and not the other way around.”

Harry recognized her as the very same witch that had looked at Scabbers, aka, Peter Pettigrew and had sold Crookshanks to

Hermione. Harry handed over the coins for the owl and carried the caged bird outside into the light. The owl closed its large eyes and settled its head on its shoulder as if to sleep. It appears that having made the connection with Harry, it could leave things in its new master's hands. Harry carried the bird while Mrs. Weasley and Ginny carried the parcels from the supply store. They opened the portal and walked in the back door of the tavern. Tom was there in a moment.

"My, we have been busy, haven't we, folks. The man from Flourish and Blott's left only just a few moments ago. I have your books stacked neatly on the table nearest the front door, Mr. Potter."

"Thanks, Tom. I appreciate that. I think we could do with lunch now if that's okay with you."

"Yes, Mr. Potter, we've been waiting for you. I have everything ready to go. Please come this way."

Tom led them to a table in a corner of the room. The room held more people than in the morning and perhaps half a dozen tables were occupied. Perhaps it was the decorum of meal time or perhaps they had been 'spoken to' but no one attempted to approach Harry although several did nod to him and one young witch, perhaps a soon to be third year, gave a little wave and shy smile. Harry waved back and smiled to her. The girl's smile got much larger and she turned and spoke quietly but with much vigor to her mother.

"I'd say you just made someone a memory for a lifetime," Ginny whispered to him.

He tilted his head down so he could speak directly into her ear.

"I thought you were going to help me watch out for getting a swelled head. You keep this up and I'm going to need to let some air out of it pretty soon."

Ginny spoke into his ear,

"No worries, sweetie, I'll be glad to help with that, too."

Then she planted a wet little kiss just in front of his ear. They both laughed.

They settled at the table that Tom had selected for them. He then told them what he had available that day. They each placed their orders and watched as Tom scuttled off to the kitchen.

“Well, this has certainly turned into an interesting day, eh, my dears. I must say you handled yourself very well this morning, dear. It was wonderful to see you with those poor folks, some of them are hanging on by their fingertips. Many witches and wizards lost everything they had. Arthur told me that the Ministry is doing what it can but it’s a big, big problem.”

“I can see that, ma’am. It was a little awkward at first but I see now that all these people, all the witches and wizards are part of the same big family sort of. There’s so few of us and we need to pull together. I imagine my grandmother Potter could have been like that first witch.”

Mrs. Weasley said nothing, she just reached across the table to give Harry’s hand a squeeze. In a few minutes Tom was back with the beginning of their lunch and the three passed a pleasant time eating and talking of small things. Harry tried to wriggle a few details about his upcoming birthday out of the two but they weren’t budging. When they were done the haggling started over the bill. Tom insisted it was gratis but Harry insisted he be allowed to treat. Harry finally stood up and leaned toward the innkeeper, asking him quietly did he really think it was a good idea to risk annoying the wizard who defeated the most feared dark arts practitioner in ages over the cost of a lunch. Tom stepped back and visibly started until he saw Harry smile and wink at him. He laughed as Harry slipped a few coins into his hand and shook his head.

“Most gracious and kind you are, Mr. Potter. You are welcome anytime, anytime.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

He escorted the Weasley women to the waiting car and then returned with the driver to collect his books. The ride home was pleasant and

uneventful. Having Ginny pressed up against his side as they both looked over his new owl certainly added to his sense of wellbeing. Hauling all his new possessions into the Burrow took some time and then the car left in a cloud of dust. Harry spent the rest of the afternoon skimming through his books, getting familiar with the titles, authors and what book was going with what subject. Dinner included Ron, who had been spending a great deal of time at Hogsmeade getting the new store set up. They had missed the opportunity to see George at the store in Diagon Alley since it had been closed for the day to allow for additional renovation. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes had taken a great deal of grief from the Dark Days at the Ministry as the recent period was coming to be known and would need more work to get it up to snuff. Ron was asking for a retelling of the encounter with the crowd on the street.

“Too cool, Harry. You’re a real hero alright.”

“Ah, not you too, Ron. Please. A guy’s best mate should be the one he can count on not talk all that hero stuff.”

“Okay, Harry. I’ll watch my step and try not to bow when you walk by,” and then he laughed uproariously as the others joined in and Harry threw a piece of bread at him.

The last days of July passed without much of interest beyond the quiet work of putting together Harry’s birthday celebration. For all intents and purposes it looked to be a low key affair. The day before, the Weasleys were busy setting up tables in the yard to accommodate the full family, but nothing more. Some bewitched lanterns were hung from the trees, the lights magically changing colors. Mrs. Weasley was busy with cooking and baking but only enough for the appetites of her husband and children, by birth, marriage and ‘adoption’. Harry was beginning to relax since it appeared that it was just going to be a modest family affair and nothing elaborate or expensive. He went to bed feeling happy and content. Ron was there and it felt like he was at his old room in Hogwarts. The morning dawned clear, sunny and warm, promising to be a great day for an outdoor event. He was greeted with birthday wishes from his best friend, who handed him a medium sized parcel.

Opening it revealed a substantial assortment of gag items from the WWW catalog.

“Some of these should come in dead useful during the party, Harry. Noise makers, smoke bombs, and a few surprises,” Ron said with a wink.

“No stink bombs, I hope.”

“No way, mate. Mum would skin me alive if I pulled that today. George or Fred might have considered it but not me.”

Breakfast was a crowded affair but the mood was light and everyone was offering Harry congratulations on his eighteenth year. He thought he was lucky to have made it that far but wasn't going to say anything for fear of putting a damper on things. He smiled and thanked them and made serious inroads into his breakfast.

“Harry, dear, I'd like to ask you a favor if you would.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Weasley. Anything.”

“We want to set some things up for you so would you mind taking a nice walk this morning, take Ginny and Ron with you and come back at noon.”

Harry looked at his 'adopted' mum through slightly narrowed eyes with a little smirky smile.

“Okay, but I hope this isn't going to be anything to crazy.”

“Don't you worry, dear boy. Nothing more then you can handle,” she said with a little wink.

Ron bounded up from the table.

“Come on, Harry. We can try out some of those presents I brought for you,” he said with a big smile.

“Cool, let's go. Coming, Ginny?”

“Of course, I’m not letting you two go off unsupervised.”

The three hurried upstairs, grabbed several hands full of WWWs best and headed out of the house in high spirits. They weren’t gone five minutes when the sound of a loud report rattled the kitchen window. Mrs. Weasley looked at her husband and sighed.

“Maybe that wasn’t such a good idea after all.”

“They’ll be fine, Molly. The boy didn’t come all this way just to blow himself up with a Weasleys’ Wizard Wheeze,” Arthur Weasley replied.

With that the rest of the Weasley family got up and went about the many chores left to get ready for Harry’s big day. In the meantime the focus of all this effort was strolling through the woods with his best friend and his best girl thoroughly enjoying the here and now. They would occasionally take out one of the noise makers and with a tap of Ron’s wand set the fuze alight and then toss it behind them onto the road. The beauty of these little noisemakers was that they weren’t explosive like an ordinary firecracker. They were concentrated little spells that when released generated the loud noise without any sparks, fire or smoke, making them perfect for both indoor and outdoor use. Harry had the feeling that unless Filch was very persistent the halls of Hogwarts were going to sound like a war zone very soon. After recent events Harry thought that would not be well received at all. But now was no time to worry about it and he held one out for Ginny to ‘light’ and then threw it well ahead of them. The smoke bombs proved to be brilliant. Once set off they produced large volumes of multicolored smoke in shades that Harry didn’t think he had ever seen before.

“This is some of Fred’s best work. George says he still can’t figure out how he came up with the spell. It’s all written down and locked away, thank goodness. We’re working like mad to get the Hogsmeade store open in time for start of term. Will you be there for the grand opening, Harry?”

“If we can work it out with my schedule I’d be glad to.”

“Cheers, mate.”

The three spent the rest of the morning terrorizing the local fauna who must have thought a thunderstorm was lurking under the trees until Ginny reminded them that noon was fast approaching so with one last volley of noisemakers and some smoke to cover their retreat they left the woods and made for home at a slightly faster pace than when they left. When they trooped into the yard they were met with a round of applause from the other Weasleys and a few extra people. Hermione rushed up and threw her arms around Harry and wished him happy birthday with tears of joy misting her eyes. Mr. and Mrs. Granger came forward and with a handshake and hug respectively gave Harry their warmest wishes for many birthdays to come. Fleur swept up to Harry next looking positively breathtaking in a light blue gown and if he hadn't known better it appeared she was using her veela heritage to enhance her unearthly beauty.

“Happy Birthday, mon ami,” was all she said.

She wrapped him in a tight hug and planted a kiss on each cheek. She then held him at arms length, smiled at him and then kissed his forehead. She then turned her smile on Ron and said,

“ello, brother-eeen-law.”

Ron could only smile back and try and remind himself to breathe. Hermione and Ginny looked at each other behind their boyfriends' backs and rolled their eyes. There were hand shakes and hugs from the Weasleys and then Mrs. Weasley called them all over to the table.

“Before we sit down to lunch and Harry's party we have a few surprises,” she began. “It seems some others remembered that it was Harry's eighteenth and wanted to offer their best wishes.”

As if on cue, an older witch Apparated into the yard.

“Professor McGonagall?” Harry said, somewhat taken aback.

“Hello, Potter...Harry, you seemed surprised to see me. Did you think I never left Hogwarts?” she said with a perfectly straight face.

Before he could answer a wizard popped into view, it was Kingsley Shacklebolt, Acting Minister of Magic.

“Happy Birthday, Harry. You’re looking much better then the last time I saw you.”

“Thank you, sir. The Burrow’s a good place to get well.”

“Yes, I can imagine so. Arthur, of course, has been keeping us all up to date on your progress but I thought this would be a good time to see for myself.”

“I appreciate your concern, sir.”

The two guests were shown to chairs that suddenly appeared at the table.

Mrs. Weasley looked at the table and when she was satisfied that all was set to her satisfaction she waved her wand and the magic lanterns came alight, candles blazed on the table and everyone gave out with the obligatory but sincere oohs and aahhs.

“Tuck in everyone, but make room for desert,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Oh, Harry, I almost forgot. Charlie sent his apologies but he wouldn’t be able to get here until mid afternoon. Something to do with his grant.”

Conversation started up around the table. At one end it was the efforts at the Ministry to unravel the mess left by all the turncoats being rooted out or having fled.

“We are arresting two or three a week at this point. Azkaban is going to be quite full by the time we get done with all this,” the Acting Minister was saying. “We are combing last years seventh years to fill positions that have been vacated. It’s going to be tough bringing them along but we have no choice.”

“Voldemort had supporters practically everywhere. They were very clever concealing themselves until it was too late,” Arthur Weasley added.

At the other end of the table, Mr. and Mrs. Granger were telling Bill about getting their practices reestablished. The cover story Hermione used is that they were working overseas providing dental care for poor Aboriginal families in Australia. Ron, George and Harry were working on plans for the Grand Opening for the WWW store at Hogsmeade. Ginny, Fleur and Hermione were doing a lot of talking and a good deal of giggling. Professor McGonagall was talking quietly with Mrs. Weasley. Both would cast occasional glances at Harry and then resume their discussion. All in all the lunch passed very pleasantly. When the food was cleared away, Mrs. Weasley gave a wave of her wand and a large cake came floating out of the kitchen. Harry had a brief flashback to when Dobby had floated Aunt Petunia's cake out of the Dursleys' kitchen, much to Harry's bad fortune. But even those unpleasant memories couldn't intrude on today's fun. The cake was a wonderful looking creation that bore a striking resemblance to the Hogwarts castle as seen from the lake. Harry thought it was amazing and said so.

“Thank you, Harry. We had to do some serious thinking about the cake. We first thought a flying broom would be appropriate but all things considered that wouldn't have been a good idea. Ron suggested a flying car but after we chased him out of the kitchen, cooler heads prevailed,” Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry gave Ron a thumbs up. Ron laughed and Hermione scowled at both of them. It was just like old times. Ginny just shook her head. The cake had eighteen candles arranged around the castle to look like lighted windows.

“Happy Birthday, Harry. Now blow out the candles and make a wish.”

Harry took a deep breath and blew hard. He was sure he had some help but they all went out. He didn't bother with the wish; he had everything he could possibly wish for right now. He had half expected some trick candles.

“Yes, Harry. George tried to slip some trick candles onto the cake but Kreacher, of all people, caught him at it. Bewitched the kitchen broom and chased him around the house with it. I thought I’d cry I was laughing so hard. Now, Harry, you cut the first piece and then we’ll take care of the rest.”

Harry used the offered knife to cut a slice out of the cake and put it on the plate in front of Ginny. She smiled up at him and it caused his heart to skip, in her own way she was every bit as beautiful as Fleur, he thought. He handed the knife back to Mrs. Weasley and soon they were all making quick work of the delicious creation. Harry was convinced Mrs. Weasley was the best cook he had ever met, not that his experience was that broad. Once the cake was done, the table was cleared and presents made their appearance.

The entire Weasley clan had gone in together and gotten Harry a leather school bag with the H for Hogwarts with HP underneath. Hermione had gotten him a small leather bound schedule book.

“We’ll use that to make sure you know where you supposed to be at all times, Harry.”

“Thanks, Hermione, I’ll need it. Funny how it matches the bag,” Harry said with a smile.

“Well then, Mr. Potter, you’ll find this even more amusing,” said Professor McGonagall. She handed him a large flat package. When it was unwrapped Harry found it was a leather monogrammed portfolio like the Professors used to carry papers around the school. Like his bag it had his initials added to the Hogwarts H.

“Wow, this is all great. But I’m going to look more like a Professor then just a student and assistant. Won’t people talk?”

“I daresay they will, Harry,” the Acting Headmistress said. “However, I doubt anyone will begrudge you a few trappings of office.”

“Harry,” came the deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt. “while the Ministry isn’t making any official recognition of your birthday I was

given a number of private messages and few little items to leave with you. They are in this bag for you to open at your leisure.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“arry, I have someseeng here from my seester, Gabrielle.”

She handed him another flat package although it was smaller then the others had been. He tore off the pale lavender paper and found a very nice picture frame with a photograph of a room done up in shades of lavender and pink. Harry blinked and looked up.

“Um, it’s very nice, Fleur. Is that your sister’s room?” he asked, confused.

“What? Let me see that, ‘arry.”

Harry handed the framed picture to Fleur. She took one look and rolled her eyes skyward.

“Mon dieu, seely girl. Gabi, come out ‘ere thees minute.”

She struck the frame with one finger. As Fleur held the frame so Harry and those around him could see, a silver haired head poked out from the side of the frame slowly followed by the slim and decidedly more grown up body of Fleur’s sister whom Harry hadn’t see since last summer when Fleur and Bill had been married. The girl’s face was blushing bright red and her hand was in front of her mouth to hide the nonstop giggles. Harry’s face went red with embarrassment as those around him laughed, all except Ginny. She was looking at the girl in the picture with slitted eyes and turned to Harry.

“I’m not sure I really like the idea of pretty girls making such a fuss over my Harry,” which was said with only a little bit of levity and the ‘my’ had been heavily emphasized. Harry gulped.

“Do not be concerned, dear Geenny,” Fleur began. “Gabi is still a bit of a seely girl and ‘as a bad case of ‘ero worship. ‘arry will not have his ‘ead turned from you, don’t you worry.”

Ginny took hold of Harry's arm in a possessive grasp and said,

"He better not, for his sake, and theirs."

Harry gulped again while the others laughed some more. Harry thought this was a good time to change the subject and cleared his throat and said,

"I just wanted to say thanks for the great gifts and this terrific party. I can't remember ever having a better time on my birthday. Although on my eleventh birthday meeting Hagrid for the first time was pretty cool."

This got more laughs.

"It's just nice to know that for the first time I have a real family and a life and a chance to go to school and not have something horrible waiting for me."

"I wouldn't say that too soon, Potter," Professor McGonagall cut in, "You haven't seen what a NEWT exam is like yet."

This got the loudest laughs yet. Right then a loud whooshing noise was heard and everyone looked up. Out of the clear afternoon sky a rider on a broom had just buzzed over the heads of the partiers. He was now doing several loops and getting ready to come in for a landing.

"Hey, that's Charlie. What's he doing on that broom? It looks like a Firebolt," said Ron.

"Don't look at me," Harry said, "mines still locked away, isn't it, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Yes, dear, it should be or someone is in a very great deal of trouble."

"Hey everyone, sorry I'm late," Charlie began as he walked up to the table, broomstick in hand. "I would have been here earlier but as I was coming out of the Ministry I ran into a couple of fellows from the

Nimbus Broomstick Company. They were having a meeting at the Sports office about brooms for the English national team. They had this with them and wanted me to show it to Harry. What do you think?"

Charlie held the broom out for Harry and the others to see. It was indeed a Firebolt, looking much the same as Harry's prized broom. Down the side however were some additional graphics engraved and chased in gold foil. It read, "Firebolt II, Harry Potter Special Edition." The rumors had been true.

"They said this was the prototype and wanted Harry to see it and if he's okay with it, they'd come and see him to make a deal."

"Wow, Harry, I can't remember the last time a broom was named after a flyer," Ron said in an awed whisper.

"And I can tell you, Harry, it is a bit faster than the original Firebolt. They said they tweaked the spell and super polished the finish to lower drag. I got here on the broom almost as fast as if I Apparated."

"Charlie, you flew from London, in broad daylight? You could have been seen by Muggles," his father said sternly.

"No way, Dad, not on this thing. I almost lost my robes when I was flat out," he laughed delightedly.

"It's beautiful," Harry said longingly as he let his finger glide over the handle finish and lettering. "Guess I'll have to take your word for how it flies for the time being. I'm still grounded." The last was said with true regret.

"Well, Minerva," Molly Weasley began. "If we ever had any doubts I think that little speech just proved that Harry has matured. A couple of years ago he and Ron would have already been plotting how to get on that thing."

"Harry, would you mind if we..." Ron trailed off.

“No, go right ahead. Give it a go and let me know what you think. We’ll tell them we were doing product testing for them.”

With that broomsticks started to appear from here and there. With mock resignation, Molly even called Harry’s Firebolt out of hiding and soon the sky was full of red headed flyers dashing madly across the sky. There was frequent landings and switching so that everyone had a chance at both the original and new edition Firebolts. For the sake of comparison of course. Ginny had flown on Harry’s Firebolt a time or two but it appears she was still unprepared for what the Firebolt II could do. At one point she was flying at breakneck speed high in the sky and tried a rapid reverse move that she had been working on all summer with the Nimbus 2001. But unlike the Nimbus which had a tendency to skid a bit on tight turns, the Firebolt II dug in and whipped around so fast that Ginny wasn’t ready and she came adrift. She began to tumble through the air and Mrs. Weasley screamed. Harry had been watching and he was already up out of his chair as Mrs. Weasley’s first shriek started. Without thinking or knowing why he did it, he thrust his right hand out as if he was using a wand and shouted as loud as he could, “ARRESTO MOMENTUM”.

A bright light flashed in Harry’s eyes. His became lightheaded and he took a step backwards and sat down heavily in the chair. As his vision cleared he could see that Ginny’s fall had slowed a great deal and Bill and Charlie were power diving to get her. They swooped in low and grabbed her between them as she nearly floated within reach. The Firebolt had begun to tumble to the ground but Ron was able to snatch it before it hit. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the foursome riding three brooms to the ground out beyond the yard wall. It was Fleur who was the first to shake off the horror of what could have happened and looked over at Harry.

“ARRY!” she screamed and rushed over to him. She was followed by the others. Harry was sitting slumped in the chair, his face was pale and glistening with sweat, his chest heaving like a bellows. His eyes were fixed on the four figures who were even now approaching him at a dead run and seemed unaware of the uproar around him. Fleur was kneeling at Harry’s side, clutching his hand and trying to get him to respond.

“arry, ‘arry, can you ‘ear me, mon ami.”

“We need Dr. Elsewhere here right now,” Mr. Weasley said.

“I’ll go, Arthur,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt and he disappeared.

By this time Ginny was there on Harry’s other side, holding his other hand and stroking his face.

“Harry, Harry, are you all right?” she asked, her voice tinged with hysteria.

Harry blinked a couple of times and then gave his head a little shake. He looked at Ginny and gave her a little smile.

“You alright, Ginny? I saw you come off the broom and then everything went kinda bright. What happened?”

“Don’t you remember, Harry?” asked Mr. Weasley. “We heard you shout ‘Arresto Momentum’ but you didn’t have your wand, but it looked like it worked anyway. Ginny practically floated down until Bill and Charlie caught her.”

“Hmm, well done them then,” Harry said, still in a daze.

There was series of popping noises behind them and suddenly two healers and a nurse were pushing their way through to Harry.

“Please, stand aside if you would.”

This was Doctor Elsewhere speaking. Bill helped Fleur up and held her aside as the small wizard came to Harry’s side. He took hold of Harry’s wrist and looked into his eyes. He took out his wand and waved it slowly over Harry’s chest and muttered an incantation. Dr. Medford had moved around to the other side and placed his hand on the side of Harry’s head as he had during his earlier visits. The nurse stood directly behind Harry’s chair with a case of instruments ready to assist either physician while Harry’s family and friends stood by feeling utterly helpless. Fleur was shaking in Bill’s hands, Hermione had her hands over her mouth and Ginny was wringing hers. Harry

seemed to be coming around as his eyes looked clearer and his breathing was slower and less pronounced. Doctor Elsewhere leaned back and put his wand away. He straightened up and turned to look at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"It appears the young man has overextended himself but it doesn't seem to be anything permanent. He'll need to get more rest but I don't believe he's in any danger. Would you agree Doctor Medford?"

"Hmmm, yes, I would agree with that. His mind is clear. What he did just took a lot out of him. Now, would someone mind explaining exactly what he did? Minister Shacklebolt was a bit unclear."

"Well," Arthur Weasley began, "it would appear that Harry performed the 'Arresto Momentum' spell without a wand and out to a fair distance as well."

"Is that true, Harry?" asked the taller older wizard.

"I guess so," Harry said in a low tired voice. "I saw Ginny come off the broom and I guess I just panicked or something. Things happened sort of fast after that."

"One moment longer, Harry, if you please," said the older healer.

He placed his hand on Harry's head a second time and concentrated, his murmured incantation buzzing in Harry's ear. He felt the tingle become a bit stronger. After a few moments the hand was removed and Dr Medford stood up.

"Incredible. To be able to execute that level of conjuration at that distance without a wand. In any given generation there are perhaps a handful of wizards capable of a feat of that magnitude, if that. But it comes at a price. As you can see, it's taken a great deal out of the boy and he'll feel the after affects for several days. Harry, I should warn you not to try that again unless it is a most dire emergency. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

“Well, folks,” Doctor Elsewhere began, “we’ve done all we can here. The rest is up to the young man himself. Just try not to give him any reason to exert himself if you can.”

Ginny blushed right to the roots of hair and looked ready to cry. Bill laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. The three medical people walked back to where they first appeared and Dr. Elsewhere turned and looked back at Harry.

“Remember, young man, you’re to come to St. Mungo’s before you return to school, agreed?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll remember.”

“Good, see you then. Shall we?”

The last was said to the other healer and nurse. With little pops they disappeared. There was a collective exhalation of breath and everyone turned their attention to Harry. He was sitting up straighter in the chair. He wasn’t sweating anymore and his pallor had improved somewhat. Ginny was back at his side, her face buried in his shoulder. She was mumbling about how sorry she was and how stupid she had been. Hermione was kneeling next to Ginny rubbing her back and offering words of encouragement. Mrs. Weasley brought Harry a glass of birthday punch and he gulped it down noisily. He handed back the glass and said,

“Guess I went and did it again, huh?”

“That’s putting it mildly, Harry,” Mr. Weasley replied. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling a little tired, but not too bad. Not at all like I was right after, well, you know...”

“Yes, we know. Perhaps we should wrap things up here.”

“No, please, don’t. I’m okay, really. I promise, I’ll sit here very quietly and you can bring me drinks and more cake and I won’t cause any more trouble.”

The look on his face was at once sincere and guileless. Then he broke into a huge grin. Some of them laughed, others just shook their heads. Ginny looked up at him with her face all blotchy and red from crying and said,

“In all the excitement I forgot to thank you for saving my life, again.”

“That’s alright, Ginny, but do you mind being more careful in the future. I’m not sure how much more I can handle.”

Ginny looked at him for just a fraction of a moment, then laughed and threw her arms around his neck. The younger Weasleys pulled up chairs around Harry and he took the pressure off by asking quiet questions about how the new broom handled. This got the conversation going and it lasted for the rest of the afternoon. Hermione had taken some time to try and explain to her muggle parents about what had just happened and why it had caused so much commotion. As medical professionals they could understand that Harry’s health had been so fragile after his collapse and that what he had done to save Ginny had taxed his still below normal strength. What they were having trouble getting their minds around was just exactly what it was he had done and its significance. Like many muggle parents, they knew that their child was involved in a world within and yet very far removed from their own. In the end they simply added it to a list of many things that made one of Hermione’s best friends a unique young man. The elder Weasleys and Professor McGonagall had moved to the far end of the table and were talking in quiet, serious tones.

“You heard what Dr. Medford said, but it sounds so unbelievable. Have you ever heard of something like this, Minerva?” asked Mrs. Weasley.

“It is true that some wizards of sufficient talent and power can execute spells without a wand. Albus Dumbledore was the only one I knew of. I suppose that Voldemort may have been able to as well. Although with him so divided with all those Horcruxs it’s hard to say. Besides, I think he considered his wand a badge of honor of sorts as a wizard and wouldn’t be without it.”

Before she could continue a popping noise was heard from beyond the garden wall. They turned and saw Doctor Medford approaching. They got up and walked over to the wall.

“Yes, Doctor, is there something wrong?”

“Not wrong in the sense that Harry is in any immediate danger. Before I go on though, I need to be sure of something. I know of course that’s Harry’s parents are dead; it is part of his legend after all. However, I wish to know is there any other family that he has?”

“No, Doctor, he does have one muggle aunt, his mother’s sister but they’ve pretty much disowned him. His godfather was Sirius Black, his father’s best friend but he’s been dead these past two years. That is why he’s here. We are all the family he really has.”

“I understand the young man is of legal age of course, but it’s important that you know this. He will need help and guidance. My specialty is the brain, the physical as well as the mental aspects of it. That is why I was brought in to deal with Harry’s dreams. In my examinations it became evident that the ways Harry’s mind and brain work have been affected by the things that have happened to him.”

He saw the stricken look on Mrs. Weasley face.

“No, dear lady, I do not mean damaged or diseased, just altered, perhaps enhanced. He has survived two killing curses, been the receptacle of a portion of the essence of one of the most powerful wizards ever to have lived and gone through a number of other magical traumas. It appears that some elements of the patterns in his brain have been altered and may be the reason why he was able to channel the kind of power necessary to do what he did this afternoon. The danger, as you’ve seen, is that it can be very debilitating and eventually result in damage to his health. Conversely, when properly channeled through his wand, his power could be overwhelming. That poses risks all its own. I thought that you should be aware of this so that you can help him understand it. I, of course, will be available to help if I’m needed.”

“Thank you, Doctor. We had just been discussing this. We will do everything we can to help him.”

“I thought as such. Good day to you all,” and with that he popped out of sight.

“Well, that was illuminating,” suggested Professor McGonagall.

“So, the beast is dead but not gone,” murmured Arthur Weasley. “I’ll wager not even Voldemort himself could have known what he was setting in motion.”

The three sat back down at the table and looked over at Harry and his ‘family’. He looked to be happy and content discussing the attributes of the new broom. It was obvious that the others were keeping an eye on Harry for any signs of stress or fatigue. Ginny had Harry’s left hand held between both of hers, occasionally bringing it up to her face to rub lightly with her cheek. Fleur was to his immediate right, tucked into the half circle of Bill’s arm but her hand would occasionally come to rest on Harry’s right arm.

“I think I’ll have a talk with Professor Flitwick when I return this evening. He should be aware of what is going on. He may be able to help Harry come to grips with this. I’ll leave it to you to broach the subject with Harry. I think it’s time for me to get back.”

“Thank you for coming, Minerva, and for all you’ve done for Harry.”

“He deserves it and more. Good bye, Molly, Arthur. I’ll just go take my leave of Harry.”

She walked over to the assembled ‘youngsters’ and cleared her throat.

“I will be taking my leave of you now, Harry. I look forward to seeing you for the start of school. I trust you’ll arrive well and in one piece.”

“Yes, ma’am. I hope so, too.”

“See that you do. Farewell to you all.” She then stepped back and Disapparated.

“Well, children, I believe it’s time we brought this party to a close. Harry could use some rest and quite frankly so could I,” Mrs. Weasley said.

The Grangers said their goodbyes and after handshakes and hugs with promises to meet at the Express they got into their car and drove off.

“I just wanted to say again, thank you all for today. It’s the best birthday I’ve ever had. Certainly the most exciting, too.”

There were a few nods and ‘hear hears’ and Ginny and Fleur each took an arm and pulled Harry upright. Ginny looped his arm over her shoulders and she walked him back into the house. The rest helped gather up the chairs and other items and called it a night. Ginny walked with Harry up to his room and before she left him she placed a hand along his cheek and kissed him lightly.

“For my hero,” she said solemnly.

He smiled back at her and she turned and went to her room. Harry made his way to his bed and flopped down on it and he was asleep before he knew it. When Ron came in from helping clean up he found Harry there still in his clothes. Ron just shook his head and pulled the bed quilt over him as best he could and then retired for the night himself.

The next morning dawned bright and clear and promised to be a warm August day. Harry missed it, of course. He didn’t wake up until closer to noon and when he did he was dismayed to find he was still in his clothes from yesterday and they were a wrinkled mess. Ron was long gone back to Hogsmeade. He rolled off his bed with a groan and fumbled about for his glasses which had wound up on the floor besides his bed stand. He made his way to the washroom at a shambling pace and when he was finished went down to the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was there working on lunch.

“Harry, my dear. How are you feeling this morning?”

“More like this afternoon, really. I’m hungry and feeling a little tired still. Not as bad as I look,” the last said with a little smile.

“Well, that’s something at least because you look a sight. Sit down and have something to eat and then we’ll get you some clean clothes. Then we need to sit down and have a little talk about yesterday.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Molly Weasley put a full plate down in front of Harry and he proceeded to devour it. She watched him for a moment or two and then turned back to her work. When Harry had finished she told him where his clean laundry was and with orders to come right back down when he was dressed. He was back at the table in less than a quarter hour. She left the pots on the stove to look after themselves and sat down across from her newest ‘son’.

“Harry, dear, there are some things you need to know about what happened yesterday. Doctor Medford came back and told us some things but thought it would be best if you heard it from one of us, your family.”

Harry looked across at her serious expression and said simply,

“Ok.”

“As you may recall, Harry, the doctor told you that what you did could be very dangerous and only something to do in a dire emergency.”

“Yes I do. The way I felt yesterday and I feel now, I wouldn’t want to do it again anytime soon.”

“Good, remember that. There is more to it though. Doctor Medford believes that with all the things you’ve been through, the exposure to the killing curses, your association with Voldemort, that little bit of him being left behind and all your other various adventures have left their mark on you so to speak. They have affected the way your mind and your brain works. No, no dear, don’t worry, he specifically said it’s not

damage or illness, but just the way things work have changed. Anyone who has known you long enough and really paid attention knows that you have great power, Harry. Don't shake your head at me, young man. This is no time for false modesty. We need to deal with truth here, Harry. As a first year you were able to hold your own against a fully grown wizard supported by the shade of Voldemort. The following year you defeated the Basilisk and Tom Riddle's shadow. And don't start in about having help from Fawkes. Dumbledore told me about that once and it was you who caused Fawkes to come to you. And what about the fully formed Patronus? It goes on and on. This is my point, Harry and what Doctor Medford wanted you to understand. What you did yesterday took great power and tremendous will. If properly channeled through a wizard's wand a spell you cast could have almost unimaginable consequences if you aren't careful."

Molly Weasley could see from Harry's expression that he was having a hard time taking this all in.

"Think of it this way, dear. What spell did you use to defeat Voldemort at the end?"

"Simple, I used Expelliarmus."

"Right, and under normal circumstances that would do what?"

"It would disarm my opponent. Knock their wand or whatever out of their hand."

"That's right, Harry. For most any other wizard that is what would happen. But for you, Harry, as you are now, in a fight, under great stress like yesterday, you would most likely blow that opponent to pieces. I don't think you'd want to do that."

From the horrified look in his eyes, she knew she was right.

"As an Auror, Harry, you would most likely be in situations like that very frequently. So what you must do is learn to deal with it. Learn to stay in control. Learn how much is enough. Professor McGonagall will, or already has, talked to Professor Flitwick to see what he can do.

You'll have plenty of people to help you Harry, but in the end, as always, it will be up to you. I just ask that you be careful and let them do so. Alright, my dear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now while we're waiting for the others to come in for lunch why don't you help me set the table?"

"Hmm, oh, sure."

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly enough. Almost as if it had been arranged, after lunch, at which Harry just sat and kept the others company while they ate, Ginny saw to it that he didn't have much time to think about things. Since he wasn't going to be walking, they played cards for a couple of hours, Ginny unmercifully taking advantage of Harry's state of mind and winning hand after hand. As the day grew hotter they left the backyard and went up to Harry and Ron's room and poured over his new books and materials, trying to figure out if his old trunk was going to be enough to get everything he needed for the new school year to Hogwarts. Dinner was a leisurely affair with just Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ginny and Harry. Ron had gone back to Hogsmeade and Percy and Charlie were staying the night in London. After dinner, Mr. Weasley called Harry aside for a private chat.

"I understand you and Molly had a talk today about what happened yesterday," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Yes, Sir, Mrs. Weasley explained it to me. Pretty scary when you come right down to it."

"I'm glad you said that, Harry. I'm glad you said scary and not exciting or interesting or fun. Great power should be scary to those who have it, in whatever form. When it gets to be exciting or interesting or God forbid, fun, that's when terrible things can happen. I'm sure you'll do what's right and get things under control. I'd expect no less."

Harry simply nodded his agreement.

“Good, now there’s something else I’d like to discuss with you, young man. I happened to be at Gringotts today at lunch time and when I saw our account statement I must say I was a little surprised.”

Harry was starting to get a bit pink in the cheeks.

“Imagine my shock when I saw that our account had grown by a hundred Galleons.”

“Good interest rates, I guess.”

“I don’t think so, Harry. Would you have any idea where that money came from?”

“Ok, it came from me. When we were there the other day and they showed me how much money I had, I had to do something. Look, Mr. Weasley, you and Mrs. Weasley have been looking after me in one way or another since my first year. Presents at Christmas and my birthday, living here for part or all of the summer, doing all kinds of things. I need to be able to give something back, and I know what you’ve said about all that big saving the world stuff but that doesn’t mean as much day to day. I mean I did help lose you the Anglia and you got fined and all. Consider it repayment for that if you have to. Please?”

Mr. Weasley looked at Harry for a moment or two and then said,

“Alright, Harry, if you feel that strongly about it but just so you know, with only Ginny in school and hardly anyone around the house these days, Molly and I are doing ok for ourselves, not to mention my having been moved up a rung or two in the last months. You are not nearly the burden you might think you are, but we’ll let it go and speak no more of it. Maybe when we get you two safely off to Hogwarts Molly and I will take a little vacation.”

“That sounds like a great idea, sir.”

With that they shook hands and Mr. Weasley went back into the kitchen and Harry drifted out into the backyard where he sat down in what had become his chaise lounge where he sat watching twilight

shift to night. Ginny had come out to join him after helping with the dinner dishes and together they enjoyed the peace and quiet, interrupted only occasionally by the mad dash of a garden gnome off on whatever errand a garden gnome might have.

Harry was back to his old, or more recent old self, by the end of the first week of August. He and Ginny were back to walking morning and afternoon and in between she continued her chaser practice at the hands of the now very skilled and very determined Kreacher. Harry joked that maybe it was time to get him a Hogwarts sweatshirt and whistle. Kreacher missed the joke entirely and asked if Master Harry was going to give him clothes and send him off. It took some fast talking to ease his anxiety. Harry had also begun reading his text books and working on the classroom material he and Bill had put together. He was busy and content to be so.

On the Monday morning before school was set to begin, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Harry and Ginny were in another four door sedan sent by the Ministry to take them to London. The Weasley women were to be dropped at the Leaky Cauldron to go shopping in Diagon Alley. Arthur Weasley was going to go with Harry to St. Mungo's for his exam. They would then meet the ladies and have lunch before going home. The ride was as smooth and uneventful as only a magical car could provide. The ladies were dropped off first and then fitting itself amongst the mid town traffic, the car made its way to St. Mungo's and its department store false front. They each stepped through the display window and found themselves in the waiting room. Harry approached the reception desk and the formidable looking witch sitting there. Without looking up she said,

"Yes, what is the nature of your problem?"

"Um, no problem really, my name is Harry Potter and I'm here to see Dr. Elsewhere."

At the sounding of Harry's name, the witch's head snapped up.

"Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Potter, right this way. We've been expecting you."

People sitting in the waiting room looked up at Harry and began to whisper to one another or gesture. Harry caught Mr. Weasley's eye, smiled and shrugged. Mr. Weasley smiled back and indicated he would wait there in the reception room until he was needed. Harry was ushered to an examination room just down the corridor from the reception room. The nurse very politely informed Harry that he needed to change into an examination gown which was the same style as used in the muggle world, short of length and tied in the back. She told him to just sit there and the healer would be there shortly. Amazingly enough she was right, with perhaps only five minutes having passed, the little wizard bustled into the room.

"Mr. Potter. Nice to see you and looking very well I might add. Let's make sure though that looks aren't deceiving, shall we?"

With that he pulled out his wand and once more began the low muttered incantations that were at the heart of his profession. He then looked at Harry's eyes, checked his pulse and his reflexes. He stuck his head out the door and in a few moments he was joined by the tall Doctor Medford.

"Hello, again, Harry. How have you been?"

"Good, sir, feeling pretty much back to normal, I think."

"That's good. May I?" the healer asked as he gestured with his right hand.

"Sure."

The wizard Neurologist placed his hand on the side of Harry's head as he had before and Harry felt the tingle. This time, the tingle was different. It seemed to pulse with an irregular rhythm. While it never actually hurt it did get a little uncomfortable at times. After a while the tingle ceased and the healer was withdrawing his hand.

"Thank you, Harry. Now if you'll just stay here a moment, Dr. Elsewhere and I need to have a little talk and then we'll be back in to tell you the results."

Harry nodded and watched the two healers leave the room. A few moments later, Mr. Weasley walked in and took a seat.

“They asked me to come in. Guess they want to tell us together.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Nervous, Harry?”

“Yes, sir. I feel fine but who knows?”

They waited for a few more minutes in silence and then the healers returned.

“Well, Harry, it appears that you’re doing just fine. Neither Doctor Medford nor I can find any permanent problems and your strength and energy levels appear normal. I’d say you’re fully recovered.”

Harry met this news with a big smile.

“Does this mean I can fly again?”

“Yes, it does, just don’t over do it. And you can have your wand back.”

“Just remember, Harry,” Doctor Medford cut in, “what you were told about using your wand. If you can avoid it until you’ve had time to work with Professor Flitwick, it might be for the best.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, Harry, that about does it,” the little healer began. “You’ve got a clean bill of health that I will notify Professor McGonagall about right away and hopefully we won’t be seeing you on official business for a long time.”

“Yes, sir, I hope so.”

There were handshakes all around and then Harry was left to get dressed. It was all he could do to keep from shouting. When he was

dressed he left the examination room and walked back to the reception room. His face was still split by a big grin and this seemed to transmit a message to those in the room. There was a smattering of applause and a few 'well, dones' and 'congratulations'. Apparently it was common knowledge that Harry had been on the mend, so to speak. He smiled back and even gave a little wave. Mr. Weasley put his arm around his shoulder and walked with him back out onto the street. The Ministry car was waiting and in a moment they were on their way to Diagon Alley.

As they walked through the Leaky Cauldron Harry smiled and returned the greetings of the few people who were there. When they stepped out onto the street it was clear that a lot of students were getting ready to return to school. Youngsters with parents and older students in groups were moving from store to store assembling the required books and materials needed for the coming year. Harry was recognized instantly and perhaps picking up on his obvious good mood various people would wave, or call out and several students he knew would come up to ask how he was doing and if he really was coming back to Hogwarts. It was slow going but they eventually made their way down the narrow street until they spied Ginny's red head just disappearing into the shop where robes were available. Harry and Mr. Weasley followed in a moment later and when the ladies saw them, they rushed up to hear the news.

"What did the doctors say, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"I've gotten a clean bill of health and I'm cleared to fly and use my wand again."

Ginny didn't bother to say anything; she just flung her arms around Harry's neck and held him tight. An elderly witch who had been taking robes down off of a rack for Ginny and Mrs. Weasley to look at stood nearby, smiling.

"It would appear that you have received good tidings?"

"Oh, yes, Harry just came from St. Mungo's and they found him to be completely recovered."

“Well, that is good news indeed. There has been much talk up and down Diagon Alley this summer. Some of it dark, some of it pure nonsense, but gossip so often is. So, now that the good news has been shared, perhaps we can return to the business at hand.”

Harry and the Weasleys all laughed at her crisp businesslike approach but she was right, this was her busiest week of the year and business was business after all. Harry and Mr. Weasley sat down and watched as Mrs. Weasley and Ginny looked at various styles and cuts and materials. At one point Harry could hear Ginny say something about ‘too expensive’ but then Mrs. Weasley whispered in her ear and Ginny shot a startled look back at Harry. He smiled and winked and Ginny’s face positively glowed. While she had been spared Ron’s embarrassment at having to have worn robes that had seen several older owners, hers had always come off the bargain rack and had to last at least a year longer than one would otherwise hope. The thought of having brand new robes in the latest style was almost overwhelming. Harry could only look on and smile. In the end she and Mrs. Weasley settled on two sets of robes for classes and everyday use cut in the latest fashion and a set of formal robes in a dark green that would set off her red hair magnificently and that would be the envy of most of the girls at school. Harry was pretty sure that whatever functions were held at Hogwarts this year he would have the prettiest, best dressed girl on his arm. Once the robes had been properly fitted, the proprietress promised they would be ready within the hour. Ginny was holding tight to Harry’s arm as they walked behind Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh, thank you, Harry. I can’t believe how beautiful my new robes are.”

“Why thank me? You’re mum and dad are paying for them, aren’t they?”

“Don’t you go all innocent on me, Harry Potter. Mum told me what you did. That was very generous of you,” and she gave him a peck on the cheek.

“It’s only money, Ginny, and a very small part of what I have. You and your family have given me something worth much more and the biggest thing in my life now. I still have the best of the bargain.”

The redheaded beauty looked up at the face of the wonderful, unusual young man she would be spending the rest of her life with and marveled at her good fortune. Had it really only been seven years ago when she first saw him on the platform at the train station? She tightened her grip on his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder as they walked along. As they passed the Quidditch supply shop he and Ginny paused to look in. At that moment a well dressed wizard who was in the shop looked out and recognized Harry. He hurried to the door and stepped out onto the pavement. He offered his hand to Harry and said in a rush,

“Mr. Potter, my name is Nathaniel Pinewood, Managing Director of the Nimbus Broomstick Company.”

“Very nice to meet you, sir. This is Ginny Weasley.” Harry saw that Ginny’s parents had backtracked having heard the introduction. “And these are her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.”

“Ah, yes. I met your son, Charlie, the other week. I understand that he brought the new Firebolt II model to you for examination?” The last was said as a question to solicit Harry’s opinion but Arthur Weasley spoke instead.

“Yes, Mr. Pinewood. My son was quite taken with it. He’s had a lot of flying experience.”

“Oh, don’t I know it, sir. We in the industry keep track of gifted fliers coming out of Hogwarts. Charlie Weasley could have flown for England had he chosen to. And Mr. Potter here has been of particular interest. Many times our field representatives have attended a Hogwarts Quidditch match to watch him fly.”

Harry was surprised and a little pleased to know he had attracted that level of attention. The man coughed a bit and looked a tad embarrassed.

“If it’s not too out of keeping, Mr. Potter, have you had a chance to think about our offer? We are getting close to the point where we need to make a production decision to be in time for next year’s World Cup.”

“What did you have in mind, Mr. Pinewood?” Arthur Weasley said, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“We are prepared to offer Mr. Potter a fixed sum up front and a small percentage of sales to follow. This would be across the line of both Firebolts and Nimbus models. We don’t feel the Firebolts will be large sellers due to cost but as a flagship model that will see mostly national and international competition and draw marketing attention to the rest of the line. In addition, we saw it as a way to pay respect to his many accomplishments, on and off the Quidditch pitch. It’s all written here.”

Mr. Pinewood removed a roll of parchment from his robe and handed it to Harry. Harry unrolled it and read the terms. When he saw the upfront sum and the projected revenue from sales of 2000s, 2001s and the new Firebolts his eyes widened. He showed it to Mr. Weasley who let out a whistle. That was good enough for Harry.

“This looks fine, Mr. Pinewood, but there needs to be one change.”

“And what might that be?” asked Mr. Pinewood, fully expecting Harry to want more money.

“The payee you have listed here needs to be changed. Take my name off and replace it with the Ministry of Magic’s fund for aiding those hurt by Voldemort and his followers. Gringotts has all the details. They can check with me if they need to verify what I ask. You can keep my name on the broom and say I endorse your product line. You can also say that a portion of the proceeds are going to help rebuild the wizarding community. What you can’t say is that it’s my portion that’s being used. Agreed?”

Mr. Pinewood was looking at Harry in open mouthed amazement. The Weasley’s were likewise amazed but not entirely surprised. Ginny was looking at him with fierce admiration.

“Mr. Pinewood, are we agreed?” Harry asked.

“What? Oh, yes, whatever you wish, Mr. Potter. That’s very generous of you. I’ll have this redrafted and ready for your signature.”

“I’ll be at the Burrow with the Weasleys through the end of the week and then I leave for Hogwarts next Monday. We start a week early this year.”

“We’ll get this to you right away, Mr. Potter and thank you very much.”

The slightly befuddled Mr. Pinewood went back into the store with the parchment clutched in his hand. Mr. Weasley gave Harry a smile and Mrs. Weasley gave him a motherly hug while Ginny clung to his arm.

“Your parents would be so proud of you, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said.

“I hope so. So, where to now?”

“We have Ginny’s books set aside at Flourish and Blotts so we need supplies, then pick up the books and robes and we are done,” Mrs. Weasley replied.

The four of them made their way to the store that sold supplies for wizardry and spell casting and got all the things on Ginny’s list. Harry exchanged some pleasantries with some of the students and parents that were there. Most of it was answering questions about his well being and accepting wishes for his continued success and good health. From there they stopped to retrieve Ginny’s books and then her robes. With arms fully laden the four made their way into the Leaky Cauldron for lunch.

Tom showed them to a large table which provided room for them and their packages. Lunch was a festive occasion. The combination of Harry passing his medical exam, Ginny’s joy at her new robes and the general satisfaction with the deal made with the broomstick people had them all in good spirits. The other patrons could not help but pick up on the jovial air around the table and if Harry Potter had reason to be happy then they sure did as well. By the time they made

ready to leave it was almost as if Christmas had come early. Harry and Mr. Weasley haggled a bit over the check but quickly settled on splitting it. They lugged all their purchases outside and deposited them into the car, which then whisked them home.

The sun was still well up in the sky by the time they had everything put away. Harry looked at Mrs. Weasley with a questioning glance and she laughed. She pulled out her wand and with a wave said, 'Accio Firebolt'. The broom came to rest just outside the door leading to the yard. Ginny summoned up her own broom and in moments the young couple was flying together above the fields across the road from the Burrow. In the beginning, they took it easy just taking long gentle sweeps over the field, allowing Harry to get his flying legs under him. Soon he and Ginny were increasing their speed and altitude and complexity of their flying. A bird on the wing may have been able to hear the whooping and screams of exhilaration. The shadows had grown long by the time the two had come in to land. The most eventful summer in Harry's young life was drawing to a close and he couldn't possibly think of a better ending.

Harry's Future, Part 3

"Harry? Harry! Wake up, Harry!"

"Mnph. What? Okay, I'm awake, Mrs. Weasley."

"You'd better get a move on, young man. The car from the Ministry will be here in half an hour to take us to King's Cross," Mrs. Weasley called through the closed bedroom door. "Ginny's been up for an hour."

"Okay, I'll be right down."

Harry dragged himself out of bed and stretched. He was still feeling the effects of trying to fit a summer's worth of flying into a week. But what a week. Having received a clean bill of health from St. Mungo's, Harry had finally been allowed to make use of his Firebolt flying broom. Long flights and Quidditch practices with Ginny had taken the place of his twice daily walks that had been the only physical activity he was allowed during his summer's long recuperation. Ginny had had the advantage of no such restriction and the improbable but highly effective assistance of Kreacher the house elf in honing her skills as a chaser. Harry was feeling rusty but by the end of the week felt he was getting back into flying trim, his natural talents making themselves felt even though his muscles were still trying to cope with the strain.

The soreness was not as pronounced this morning and by the time he was washed, dressed and sitting at the table gulping down his breakfast he was feeling more human, or wizard, as the case may be. Since he hadn't yet gotten his wand back, Mr. Weasley obliged by levitating his overburdened trunk down the stairs. Ginny's was already waiting by the door. That trunk's owner was presently sitting across from Harry and carrying on a decidedly one sided conversation about how excited and happy she was to be going back to school. The prospect of renewed Quidditch competition, showing off her new robes, seeing old friends and in a whispered confidence when her parents weren't nearby that she and Harry would be out from under parental supervision, had her acting more like a giddy

second year then a young woman attending her seventh and last year of Hogwarts.

Harry couldn't help but smile around the mouthful of sausage he was currently working on at the sight of this beautiful young redhead who formed the core of all his hopes and plans for the future. He had seen her in so many dire circumstances and life threatening situations that to see her so happy and buoyant struck him to his heart. He reached across the table to take her hand and silently mouthed,

"I love you."

The object of his affections stopped in mid sentence, wide eyed and brought his hand up to her face and then kissed it. She smiled and didn't say another word until he was finished eating. It was just in time, as the sound of a car motor came through the half open front door.

"All right, my dears. Time to be off. Arthur? Are we ready to go?"

"Yes, Molly, dear. I'll handle Harry's trunk, Ginny can manage hers."

Two trunks floated down the short walk way to where the large Ministry sedan waited. The driver, dressed in a dark muggle suit waited with the boot open. The baggage was quickly stowed. Harry had his new barn owl in its cage and he and Ginny slipped in first with Mrs. Weasley. Mr. Weasley took the front passenger seat and when all were secure the car backed around and headed off for King's Cross station in London.

"You realize, of course, Arthur, that this is the last time we'll be making this trip."

"I know, Molly. The end of an era. But a very happy, satisfying end. But don't forget, next month we'll be coming back to begin our vacation. A wizard's tour of the Mediterranean."

"Thank you for that, Harry. It's very generous and completely unnecessary, you know," Mrs. Weasley said.

“Yes, ma’am, I know. We’ve had this discussion but after putting up with me all summer you deserve a break.”

The discussion, sometimes contentious, in a family kind of way, had been a continuation of the one Harry had with Mr. Weasley about the gift of one hundred Galleons that had ‘magically’ appeared in the Weasleys’ account at Gringotts. Mrs. Weasley didn’t seem to mind when some of the money was used to buy Ginny her first set of top flight robes but when it was proposed to use the rest plus a small bonus that Arthur had received for his hard work over the summer to go on a vacation she raised many objections. Harry and Arthur used every logical argument they could think of to convince her until Harry fell back on an untrumpable gambit. They were sitting around the table, Harry, Arthur and Ginny, with Mrs. Weasley standing with her back to them doing dishes. Harry stood up, came up behind his ‘adopted’ mother and gently but firmly turned her to face him. He pulled her into a warm embrace and said quietly, which was now recognized as Harry at his most serious,

“Mum,” he started, and he felt Mrs. Weasley shudder a bit, “you have given me so much for so long, why can’t I be allowed to give this little bit back?”

It was simple, sincere and absolutely devastating to the objections Molly Weasley had been raising about wasting his money, needing to hold on to it for the future and all other manner of motherly logic. After a loud sniffle from the region of Harry’s shoulder she looked up at him and said through teary eyes,

“That was so unfair, Harry,” she began. “How am I to possibly argue with that?”

“You can’t, that was the whole idea,” he said, his bright green eyes alight with mischief.

Harry’s ‘Mum’ laughed, stepped back and swatted him with the dish towel that was still clutched in her hand. And that was that.

They chatted about nothing in particular as the magical car slipped and slid its way through the muggle traffic and in short order they

found themselves on the sidewalk outside King's Cross. The driver pulled the two trunks out of the boot and onto a trolley. Harry placed the owl cage on top of the trunks and was making ready to push it when Mr. Weasley waved him off. He had a funny look on his face for he had seen something Harry was yet to notice.

"Hey, Harry, Harry Potter," called out an all too familiar voice.

Harry whipped around and saw standing some ten feet away the large form of Dudley Dursley. He was standing alone, looking uncomfortable and out of place. Harry took a couple of steps forward.

"Dudley?" he asked incredulously. "What are you doing here?"

"Um, I came to see you, Harry. That strange old lady, Mrs. Figg came by back in July and told us what had happened. Said you'd be starting earlier this year. I just came up to see how you were." Dudley spent most of the time looking at his shoes.

"Gee, thanks, Big D.," Harry said, which got a little smile from Dudley. "It was kinda rough there for a while but it's good, it's all good. Uh, how are your mum and dad doing?"

"They're Mum and Dad, ya know. I've been working at Dad's business, on the loading platform. He says I gotta work my way up, but its ok, you know. I gotta get going. Dad only gave me a half day off to come up here. Just wanted to see if you were okay, ya know." The last was said with his head up, his eyes questioning.

"Thanks, Dudley. I'm glad you did, it means a lot," Harry said, holding out his hand.

It was engulfed in Dudley's meaty paw. Dudley gave Harry a true smile and then turned and began walking away.

"Hey, Big D," Harry called out.

Dudley turned around.

“Take it easy and don’t give Uncle Vernon any trouble. That was my job.”

Dudley laughed a bit and as he walked away his head was a little higher and his step a little lighter. Mr. Weasley clapped Harry on the shoulder and Mrs. Weasley smiled at him.

“He’s family, you know?” Harry said as way of explanation.

Ginny took hold of Harry’s arm and together they walked into the station, found the wall between platforms nine and ten and stepped through. When Mr. and Mrs. Weasley followed through they found Harry and Ginny at the center of a small mob. Hermione was there as was Luna Lovegood with her large dreamy eyes, little Dennis Creevey was bouncing up and down with excitement and dozens of other Hogwarts students were gathered around to welcome him back ‘home’. The Weasleys made their way over to the baggage car and stood watching as the porters loaded the trunks in. Mrs. Weasley held onto Harry’s owl cage. The conductor was the one who finally had to wade in and bring the impromptu reception to an end.

“All right, you all need to be getting on the train, only fifteen minutes until the express pulls out,” the conductor shouted to be heard above the din. “Yes, yes, you can all say hello to Mr. Potter later. Right now he needs to get on the train just as you all do. Mr. Potter if you and Miss Granger would come with me please. I’m afraid the young lady will have to find her waywhat? Well, I don’t know...most irregular, well if you insist, please come this way then.”

As he spoke the conductor was working to separate Harry and Hermione, and apparently reluctantly, Ginny, away from the well wishers and back to the rear of the train. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were just able to give them their good byes before they were shown to the last car. Harry couldn’t remember ever seeing this car on his previous trips on the express and based on the looks from Hermione and Ginny, neither had they. The conductor led them up the steps and opened the door. The back half of the rear car was given over to a single large compartment appointed with very comfortable looking chairs, couches and a table.

“Compliments of Hogwarts and the Ministry, Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger. Please make yourself comfortable and have a pleasant trip. Gots to go round up the rest of them lot and get em on the train.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks,” Harry said a little dazed.

He stepped into the compartment and said to no one in particular,

“A bit much, don’t you think?”

Ginny flounced down onto a big overstuffed chair and said,

“I dunno Harry, might be fun to ride in style for once. The compartments get a little cramped with six people shoved in.”

“Come on, Ginny, you know this isn’t me. What about my friends? I was looking forward to talking with them on the way up.”

“Well, Harry,” Hermione began, having taken a seat near Ginny. “First of all most of your close friends, besides us that is, won’t be on the train. Ron is already at Hogsmeade, who knows when Neville will show up, and the rest are finished with school or are...”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Besides, Harry, no reason you can’t invite people back here. I bet this door leads forward. Yup, once we get rolling I’ll take a stroll and see who’s out there and we can have a little party right here,” Ginny offered.

“Ok, I guess that should be alright.”

Within half an hour of the train pulling out of the station several friends of Harry, Ginny and Hermione that were on the train were comfortably ensconced in the spacious compartment.

“Wow, Harry, this is really amazing,” offered Luna Lovegood. “It’s like your some kind of foreign dignitary or something.”

“More like they didn’t want me starting up some commotion on the rest of the train.”

“Come on Harry, don’t be so surprised that people want to do things for you,” Ginny said, her face looking serious. “Just say thank you and let them do what they can. Trying to turn them down or getting all embarrassed will just hurt their feelings. You spent a lot of years with people trying to tear you down. Enjoy the feeling of them trying to appreciate what you did for them, us. Ok?”

“Ok, Ginny. You’re probably right.”

“Yes, just remember that I’m always probably right and life will be so much nicer.”

Then she laughed and gave him a hug. Harry could only smile. So the little band at the back of the train sat and talked, cleaned out the snack cabinet and played a number of hands of Exploding Snap. It was the best trip to Hogwarts any of them ever had.

As usual the train pulled into Hogsmeade station well after sundown. The carriages were there as usual and Hagrid was there to round up the first years as usual and the station was engulfed in momentary chaos and pandemonium, as usual. Harry, Ginny and Hermione got out of the last car by themselves, their visitors having returned to their original seats to gather their coats and slip on their school robes.

“Alright there, Harry?” boomed Hagrid over the heads of the first years.

“Hey there, Hagrid, yup, doing great, thanks.”

“Hello Hermione, Ginny, see you all in the Great Hall,” he yelled. “Alright, all you first years, follow me to the boats, great night for sailing.

The three made their way to the last coach in line, Harry seeing the thestrals standing in their traces. The ride up to the castle was short and uneventful. As they strode up the stairs to the main doors, the Gryffindor ghost, Sir Nicholas drifted out to meet them.

“Ah, Harry Potter and Miss Granger. So good to have you back with us. And of course you too, Miss Weasley. I have been asked to inform you that your place at the Gryffindor table will be at the extreme end of the senior section, denoting your place as the most senior seventh years. Miss Weasley you may sit with them since you’ll be in the seventh year section as well.”

“Thanks, Sir Nicholas, it’s great to be back,” replied Harry.

The ghost waved them through the doors with a formal bow, holding his nearly severed head in place with one hand. The Great Hall was abuzz with conversation as the second through seventh years had found their places. Harry and Hermione found their places at the end of the Gryffindor table and Ginny slid in beside Harry. Many of the older Gryffindors waved at them from along the table. There were further acknowledgements from the other tables, even a wave or two from the Slytherin table. Harry made sure to return them as best he could.

“May I have your attention please,” Professor McGonagall said as she rapped the gavel.

That she was addressing the assembled students indicated that she was at least still acting Headmistress. The students applauded loudly. More gaveling finally got them settled.

“Yes, thank you. Welcome back to another, and I hope successful, year at Hogwarts. I hope that all of you had a good summer and that you return ready to work hard. As you know we are here a week early to allow for a review period to assist you to get back on track for this year’s studies. For those of you who had been removed from the school early last year and now find yourself repeating, we hope this period will help ease your transition back into the school. The faculty stands ready to help you in any way, but regardless of what has transpired in the past, we will expect you all to uphold the standards and traditions of the school. As you may have noticed, contrary to what you were told by me the last time we met, it was decided that the first years would likewise be called in to start the school year early.

It was felt it would allow them to become acclimated to the school in the usual way and feel a part of the effort to get us back to normal.”

“So now if you will, let’s welcome our new first years. Professor Sprout, if you would.”

The short, rotund Professor of Herbology made her way down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables followed by a double line of eleven year olds. It appeared that there was no shortage of new students, combined with the returning muggle-borns minus the few junior students who were lost to Voldemort’s forces, it looked like Hogwarts would be a little crowded this year. The Slytherin table looked to be the most affected with fully half the seats vacant. Professor Sprout lined them up along the front of the raised dais that held the faculty table. From Harry’s distant view point it was hard to make out the small faces but he could only imagine that they looked anywhere from apprehensive to down right terrified at what was to come, especially those who were born of non magical parents and had no idea what was to happen. As the sorting hat began its annual recitation Harry’s thoughts drifted back to his time at the front of the room. Barely aware of his real heritage and all that lay ahead of him he recalled what the hat had said to him, about the courage, the talent, and the strength of mind, of his need to prove himself. He also remembered his fateful decision to beg the hat not to put him in Slytherin where it first thought to place him. Perhaps it had picked up on that piece of Voldemort that resided within. He was pulled out of his thoughts by the applause at the end of the hat’s performance.

“Wow, did you hear that Harry?” Ginny said excitedly.

“Hear what? I was a little distracted.”

“The hat, Harry, the hat. It called on all of Hogwarts to follow your example for bravery and selflessness and perseverance. You didn’t hear it?” Hermione said with some exasperation.

Harry just shook his head and realized that the applause wasn’t for the hat, it was for him. Everyone in the Hall was standing up and applauding and looking right at him. He groaned inwardly and could

only offer a smile and wave. Professor McGonagall must have used a Sonorous spell because her voice boomed out over the hall.

“Alright everyone, that’s enough. On to business please.” She switched off the spell and then said,

“Professor Sprout, if you please.”

The portly professor unrolled the scroll of parchment and began calling out names in alphabetical order. Harry applauded loudly for all the selections although a bit more for the new Gryffindors. Soon it was over.

“Now, enjoy your dinner one and all.”

The welcoming feast appeared as always and Harry began to serve both Ginny and himself. He was still a bit taken aback by what had occurred but as Ginny had said he needed to adjust to it and let things take their course. As he ate he looked about the room looking for familiar faces and lamenting the loss of those either through graduation or death that he wouldn’t see again. He looked up at the faculty table and caught sight of Bill Weasley who was having a quiet conversation with Professor Slughorn. Hagrid was there of course, bigger than life. He recognized other teachers as well. It gave him a sense of comfort. During dessert the heads of houses walked along their tables handing out schedules. Bill was taking over for Professor McGonagall and when he got to Harry he said,

“Here you are Harry, quite a load you’re carrying. Shouldn’t be too bad though compared to last year,” Bill said, his scarred face showing half a smile.

“Thanks, Bill..I mean Professor Weasley,” Harry said with a smile.

“As you can see, your first DADA class with the first years is Tuesday right after lunch. I’ll be there to introduce you then you’re on your own.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied with a wink and got one in return.

“Let’s see your schedule, Harry,” Hermione said.

He slid the paper over and she began to read it.

“It’s a full week and no mistake, Harry, but I think we can sort it out. Let me hold on to this and I’ll jot out some notes and give it back to you in the morning. I see we have a few classes together so we can study together. How about you Ginny, any thing in common?”

“Um, let’s see, yes, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, and Potions. Looks like we have three together. That’ll be cool.”

Harry leaned over and whispered but not very quietly,

“Or very distracting.”

Ginny giggled and Hermione rolled her eyes then laughed. Harry was glad that his new school bag was a good size. He didn’t think he’d have time to sprint back to the tower to exchange books midday. The conversation went on for about fifteen minutes until Professor McGonagall gaveled for silence.

“Now that you’ve all gotten a look at what busy schedules you have it’s time for you to retire and get ready for a very full year. My best wishes for your success. You are dismissed.”

The students all rose and began moving out of the hall. The Gryffindor Prefect motioned for Harry and Hermione and then walked over to join them.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, we’ve made arrangements for your rooms. You’ll find them at the very top of the tower using your respective staircases. They are a bit small but you’ll have them to yourselves. With extra students we’ve had to make some changes. Third, Fourth and Sixth years have six in a room for the boys. The common room is going to be a bit crowded this year,” he said with wry grin.

“Oh, thanks, um...” Harry grasped for a name.

“It’s Tom, sir. Tom Medford.”

“Medford? Are you related to Dr. Medford of St. Mungo’s?”

“Yes, sir. He’s my uncle, my dad’s oldest brother.”

“Wow, he’d been a lot of help to me this past summer,” Harry replied with a big smile.

“That’s good to hear, he couldn’t tell us a lot about what he was doing. Doctor patient confidentiality. But he did say it was the most interesting case he’s ever worked on. You know, I thought my first name was going to be of more interest to you, all things considered.” His face looked a little anxious.

“Don’t worry about it, Tom,” Harry laughed. “I’m not going to go around hexing everyone I find with that name. Oh, and it’s, Harry.”

“Ok, Harry. Duty calls,” he said then called back over his shoulder. “Alright, Gryffindors, lets get moving. First years, keep up and stay in order. It’s easy to get lost at first.”

Harry hung back with Ginny and Hermione and let all the Gryffindors go past, then fell in behind. He wanted to be able to talk to them and at the same time figured they could help herd the first years along. He remembered how confusing it was his first time.

“Private rooms. Very swank, you two, I’m jealous,” teased Ginny.

“Probably some old attic they threw beds and a desk into,” Harry said.

“Now, Harry, you know full well they wouldn’t do that to you. I’m sure it’s going to be very nice no matter what size,” Hermione mock scolded.

“Well, if nothing else, it will make it easier, what with having Kreacher along. I’m still kind of surprised they agreed to let him stay here.”

“I dunno Harry, it was Professor McGonagall’s decision and since it was mentioned how much help he was with my Quidditch practice

and you know how she feels about the cup and all,” she said with a grin and a shrug.

“You know I never thought about that, but she’s the Headmistress now, she can’t be partial anymore.”

“Harry, you are just so cute when you’re so clueless. Of all the things the Professor is, being a Gryffindor supporter is the thing she is most,” Ginny said giving Harry her most superior look.

“I guess your right, Ginny. Hey, you, first year. Watch where you’re going, you almost fell down the wrong staircase.”

“I’m sorry, sir, Mr. Potter, sir,” the young boy said.

“Don’t be sorry, just be careful, okay?” Harry said kindly.

“Yes, sir,” the boy replied as he hurried forward to catch up with his classmates.

“Well, Professor Potter, you handled that pretty well,” Hermione said.

“Thank you, Miss Granger,” Harry said with his most haughty tone, his nose pointed to the ceiling.

Ginny clouted Harry on the shoulder while Hermione poked him hard in the ribs with her fist. Harry laughed and darted forward to escape their mock wrath. They finally found themselves at the portal to the Gryffindor common room. The Fat Lady was still on guard although her portrait was swung back out of the way to allow entrance to the students. Harry ducked around and said,

“Good evening, ma’am, good to see you again.”

“Hullo, Harry, it is very good to see you,” she then leaned forward and said in a low whisper. “Should they neglect to inform you, the password is ‘better days’”.

Then she gave him a conspiratorial wink. Harry laughed and winked back. He then waved and came back around in time to see Hermione

climb through the hole. Harry followed through and the portrait swung closed on its own. All of the students were packed into the common room while Tom Medford read out the rules for the Gryffindors and room assignments. This was mostly for the benefit of the first years, many of whom didn't have any idea what was going on. Harry hung back by the end of the entrance tunnel. He didn't wish to create any more of a distraction than was possible. It was a gallant but mostly futile gesture. Heads were constantly turning in his direction; a second year actually fell over a low footstool when she tried to get a better look at him and took a misstep. The Prefect rolled his eyes and his shoulders drooped. He looked over at Harry.

"Ok, Tom, I had hoped to avoid this but, everyone, can I get your attention for a minute. Yes, I'm Harry Potter. No, I'm not ten feet tall or covered in ogre skin or anything else even more ridiculous that you might have heard. It wasn't all that long ago that I was a very confused first year like you are," he said looking pointedly at the youngsters huddled by the fireplace. "And I'm just as excited as those of you returning to what ever year you're in. Maybe I'm more excited since I may actually get through a year with out some major disaster," he said with a lopsided grin.

This got a few laughs and the tension in the room began to dissipate.

"And yes, you will see me as an instructor in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, but I'm a teaching assistant not a professor so please, don't let my presence in the tower cause you any anxiety. Ok?"

He got mostly nods and a few 'ok, Harry' from the older students and a few high pitched 'yes, sir's from the younger. Harry smiled back and said,

"Ok, Tom, hopefully they'll pay attention to you now," he said with a smile.

"Thanks, Harry. Right, now as I was saying, boys to the left, girls to the right, you'll find your rooms labeled and your trunks already placed inside. Harry and Hermione will be at the top of the tower in

their own rooms. No one, and I mean, no one, is allowed up there without their express permission, understood?”

This got a more vocal response.

“Alright you lot, up you go. See you in the morning.”

Harry, Ginny and Hermione hung back until the rest of the students made their way up the stairs. Ginny then gave Harry a hug and brief kiss and whispered,

“See you in the morning, my hero,” she said, only half playfully.

“Good night, my love,” he replied softly.

Harry watched her ascend the stairs to the girls’ side of the dormitory rooms.

“Good night, Harry. I’ll make a few notes before I go to sleep and return your schedule in the morning.”

“Thanks, Hermione. I know with your help I’m going to do just fine this year.”

“You’re welcome, Harry,” was all she said but gave him a hug and then she went up the stairs.

Harry walked up the stairs to the room at the top of the tower. It was a fair way up but any Hogwarts student was well accustomed to stairs so Harry didn’t mind too much. When he got to the door he found the brass key in the lock so he took it out and opened the door. It wasn’t so bad. It was about the size of the room he had shared with Ron, Neville, Seamus and Dean, perhaps a bit smaller. It held the traditional four poster bed but the curtains were left off since he had all the privacy he needed. There was a desk, a wardrobe and a larger storage cabinet. His trunk was at the foot of his bed but it was empty. All his clothes had been put away and his pajamas were laid out on the bed. There was also a good sized window that gave a fine view of the lake, Hogsmeade and the mountains. What he didn’t see was

Kreacher. He knew he had been there since all his things were put away but he wasn't to be seen or in any of the cabinet spaces.

"Kreacher?" Harry called out.

With a pop the house elf appeared.

"Yes, Master Harry?"

"There you are. Thanks for taking care of all my stuff, Kreacher."

"It is Kreacher's task and..." he appeared to be searching for the right word, "Kreacher's pleasure to attend to your possessions, Master Harry. Master finds all is well?"

"Yes, Kreacher, it's great. Um, where did you put your basket and blanket, Kreacher?"

"If Master Harry does not object, Kreacher would like to find a sleeping space with the other Hogwarts house elves. Kreacher has found welcome with them and it would make Kreacher happy to spend time with them."

"Well, sure, Kreacher. I think that would be really great. I don't mind at all. By the way, have you given any thought to what I've asked you about being free and working for wages?" Harry asked him.

"Yes, Master Harry, and Kreacher is beginning to understand what Master Harry is talking about. Kreacher will tell Master Harry soon."

"Ok, Kreacher. That's fine."

"If Master Harry has no need of Kreacher tonight, may he go to his sleeping space?"

"Sure, Kreacher. Have a good night."

The house elf bowed and popped out of sight. Harry smiled at the thought of Kreacher socializing with the Hogwarts house elves. He remembered from his look at his schedule that tomorrow he had

Potions first and then Charms. He laughed at the thought of how depressing it would have been to have Potions first off. How things had changed. He pulled his books down and then it hit him. He was supposed to have talked to Professor Dumbledore when he returned to Hogwarts, plus he needed his wand for tomorrow's Charms class. He made sure he had his door key, closed the door behind him and hurried down the stairs, through the common room and out through the portal. Technically it was still within hours for students to be out and he wasn't sure if his status as a teaching assistant would allow him more latitude but he hurried to the Headmaster's office as quickly as he could.

In short order he found himself at the statue that served as the door to the stairwell that led up to the office anteroom. What he didn't have was the password that would move the statue aside. Harry was feeling more than a little foolish. He knew that Dumbledore was fond of sweets as passwords but he had no idea what Professor McGonagall would use.

"Quidditch cup."

The statue didn't budge. Harry began to run through a dozen different words and nothing happened. As he stood there scratching his unruly hair, the statue moved aside without his prompting.

"Come up, Potter," the acting Headmistress called down.

Harry hurried up the stairs and found Professor McGonagall waiting for him at the top. She smiled at him and said,

"Go on in, Harry, he's waiting for you. I'm off to my room so you can let yourself out. The password is 'hope'."

He walked toward the office door as he heard Professor McGonagall's footsteps fade and then the grinding of the statue moving back into position. He hesitated a moment then grasped the handle and pushed the door open. He stepped into the dimly lit room. It was just as he remembered. He did notice that Fawkes was not there nor his stand. He could hear the snores coming from the various portraits but he was pretty sure most of them were fake.

When he focused on the portrait of Albus Dumbledore he found the former Headmaster fully awake and alert watching Harry with the same twinkle in his eye and small smile that Harry remembered so well.

“Good evening, Harry. It’s very good to see you looking so well.”

“Thanks, Professor. It’s great to see you again.”

“First of all, Harry, you will find your wand there on the desk. Please feel free to reclaim it.”

Harry looked down at the desk and there in the middle was his wand. He walked up to the desk and reached out and took it. The wood felt warm in his hand and he got a tingle up his arm as he held it. Without a word he took it and tucked it inside his robe.

“Harry, I’ve said this before, but allow me an old man’s tendency to repeat myself. You have performed more magnificently than I could possibly have imagined. I am overjoyed that you are alive and well and back here at Hogwarts.”

“Thank you, Professor, I’m glad to be here. Really glad. But I wonder if I can ask you something?”

“You may, Harry. I will hold nothing back. The time for that has passed.”

“Did you think that there was any way I was going to live through all this?”

“I had always hoped, Harry, but quite frankly I thought the probability to be very, very slight. It seems Tom Riddle wasn’t the only one to underestimate the power of your mother’s love for you, Harry. I thought that at the least, the last encounter with Riddle would have been the end for you.”

“But you were willing to send me out against Voldemort anyway weren’t you?”

“Yes, Harry, I was. Many lives had been lost to him over the years. My hope had been that if you did die, you would be the last. I will make no excuses nor offer any apologies, my boy. This was war and sacrifices had to be made. But it does not diminish my joy at your success and my boundless admiration for you. You, on the other hand, have every right and reason to think much less kindly about me.”

Harry took in a deep breath. It answered many questions and he let them work their way into his mind. As he looked around the room he saw a fully set wizard's chess board. The analogy wasn't lost on him. He walked over to the board and looked at the two kings. He laid them both down on the board and then picked up a pawn. He placed it in the middle of the board.

“Something like this, Professor?”

“Yes, Harry, something just like that. Both kings dead and the pawn survives. But Harry, you were, and are, far more than a pawn, but I accept your analogy.”

“No, Professor, I don't think I will think less kindly of you. Your choices in this were few and desperate. You made your moves for the greater good. I can't hold that against you.”

From the portraits came a smattering of ‘here, here’, ‘well done him’ and from one up high near the rafters,

“Mark my words, he'll be on this wall one day.”

Harry could only smile and shrug, who knew what the future held? He spent some time telling Dumbledore of his summer and when they got to the matter of his unaided ‘Arresto Momentum’ spell again there were murmurs from around the room.

“Yes, Harry, Professor McGonagall told me about what had happened. Truly incredible. It would seem you possess unexplored depths. I would encourage you to take the time you have this year to explore them. I will of course always be at your disposal to offer what I can, but as always Harry, the true answers will come from within you.

As such I have ever confidence that you will succeed. Now I suggest you get along to bed, you have a busy day ahead."

"Yes, sir, a good many of them. Good night, sir. Good night, ladies and gentlemen," he offered to the other portraits.

"Good night, Harry," replied Dumbledore.

There was a chorus of good wishes and a few comments about what fine manners he had for one so young. Harry walked out of the office and through the anteroom and down the stairs. He said 'hope' and the statue swung away. He took his time as he considered what he had been told. It was true, that in the battle between Voldemort and Dumbledore he had been like a chess piece, perhaps not a pawn, maybe a knight or bishop but a piece none the less. One that would have been sacrificed if it had been necessary. And they thought it would be. Very sobering thoughts but ones that he could now handle based on the outcome. He climbed the last staircase feeling strangely at peace. He had come to understand his place in the greater scheme of things and he could accept it. It's amazing what survival can do for one's outlook.

"Better days," Harry said to the portrait who swung aside slowly, the Fat Lady looking sleepy.

"Thank you," Harry said.

He crawled through and made his way up to his room. He changed into his pajamas and climbed into bed. He lay with his hands behind his head staring up at the ceiling, his eyes tracing the cracks and knots in the exposed ceiling beams. His mind was full of images and this triggered the memory of his session with Dr. Medford and how the use of the TV analogy had led him to quickly deal with thwarting the remnant of Voldemort. He wondered if using that same kind of imagery might help him with other aspects of magic. He'd have to give that some thought. Another thought that bubbled up out of nowhere was that wizards and witches performed a lot of magic without wands. They Apparated and Disapparated without wands, used floo powder, flew on brooms and communicated with their owls without wands. There were many questions he hoped he could find

the answers to this year. Without the fear of Voldemort hanging over his head he thought he could finally try and learn something significant about magic. If he wanted to pass his NEWTs he better learn. He finally drifted off to sleep.

“Master Harry must wake up.”

“What? Oh, ok, thanks, Kreacher. Guess I don’t need an alarm clock with you around.”

“Kreacher does not know what an alarm clock is but it is Kreacher’s task to awake Master Harry in the morning. Master Harry’s things are laid out and may use the Prefects bathing room. A note was left under the door by the one named Tom.”

“Ok, thanks.”

Harry dragged himself out of bed and pulled on his robe and slippers. He made his way down the stairs, bumping into the occasional sleepy eyed Gryffindor. The door to the Prefect’s bathing room opened at Harry’s touch and it looked much the same as it had four years earlier when he used it to discover the secret of the second clue, the Mer peoples’ song in the dragon’s egg. He pulled off his pajamas and stepped into the shower stall. The initial rush of cold water helped wake him up and then the eventual warm water made the shower a pleasant experience. He was washed and back in his room by seven thirty and down to breakfast by eight. Ginny and Hermione were already there and when Harry walked up to his place at the table, Ginny bounced up and gave him a big hug and a peck on the cheek.

“Good morning, Harry, how did you sleep last night?”

“Not too bad, took a bit to drift off but no problems. How about you?”

“It took awhile, we had lots to catch up on,” she said with a giggle.

“Oh really? I can imagine,” he said.

Both Hermione and Ginny began to laugh and Ginny pulled Harry down to his seat on the bench. They ate their breakfast and as there were no notices to be read, students began moving to their respective classrooms about fifteen minutes before nine o'clock. Harry, Hermione and Ginny along with the few other Gryffindor seventh years taking Potions made their way to the dungeon classroom that had held so many bad memories for the three of them. As they entered, Professor Slughorn was there to greet them.

"Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Potions. Please find places for yourselves. Choose what partners you'd like and let's get on with our review. As you know, we will take this week to remind ourselves about what an accomplished sixth year should know and be prepared to deal with as seventh years seeking a successful outcome on their NEWTs."

Harry and Ginny paired up without even thinking about it. Hermione found herself paired with a Gryffindor seventh year girl. The other students, apparently a mix of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws continued to file in. Last to make her way into the room was Luna Lovegood. She gave Harry and Ginny an airy wave and settled into the back of the room.

"Harry, I'm glad to see you looking so well. My potion was helpful, I trust."

"Yes, sir. A healer from St. Mungo's came out and helped me deal with my dreams and I didn't need it after that, but it was very effective while I was using it."

"Well done then. And that is an important lesson to learn," he directed to the rest of the class. "Healing potions can be marvelous things, but it is never good to rely on them longer than they are intended. This is something we will discuss as the year progresses."

And so began his first class of his last year at Hogwarts. It opened up a whole different world to Harry. He found himself hanging on every word, eager to learn. He began to understand the excitement that Hermione must feel when some new bit of information took its place. During that week he absorbed significant amounts of information

either new that he hadn't picked up when he went through his sixth year or were so far down in his subconscious that they needed to be dredged up again. Two classes that week were note worthy. The first was his initial charms class that first morning. Tiny Professor Flitwick stood atop his pile of books on his desk.

"Good morning, class, so good to see you all again. I trust you are all in good health and that you have your wands well cared for and ready. We will do some preliminary exercises to get you warmed up, although I dare say some of you have had plenty of practice in the recent past," the little Professor said with a wry grin.

"Please pair off and practice the following charms together, Levitation and Lumos. Harry, if you would I'd like to speak to you over here please."

This request left Ginny and Hermione to practice together while Harry walked over to the Professor's desk.

"Harry, I'm sorry that I haven't had the time to speak with you before this, but based on what Professor McGonagall has told me about what happened on your birthday, we need to proceed carefully. What you were able to accomplish in that moment of stress is an indication of what might be possible with your wand. We need to probe that and the first step will be a little demonstration. I don't mean to put you on display but it is an important lesson. This is an advanced class and your situation presents an advanced opportunity. Is that all right with you, my boy?"

"Sure, Professor, whatever you think is best," Harry replied.

"Excellent, let's move over to the other side of the room. Everyone," he called out. "Please halt your practice and take a place on that side of the room."

He pointed to the far side with the windows. Using his wand he moved a large wooden mannequin and placed it a foot in front of the stone wall directly opposite the window. The mannequin's arm was held up with a false wand in its hand.

“You are all advanced students that have obtained high marks on your OWL. You show excellent potential to do very well in your NEWT otherwise you would not be here. One thing that you must learn is that you cannot just point your wand, yell out the name of a charm and wait for the results. The results could be more than what you want. You must also learn to control the amount of power you put through your wand, like you would water through a faucet. To demonstrate my point I would like for Mr. Potter to use one of his best charms, Expelliarmus. As you know this is a disarming charm meant to remove a weapon from an opponent’s hand which is well within the capabilities of the average witch or wizard. A strong wizard or several acting in concert can knock down or even throw the opponent some distance.”

Harry flashed back to his duel with Malfoy in his second year when he tossed his nemesis backward with the Expelliarmus charm.

“With Mr. Potter’s assistance we will explore what can happen if that power is not properly controlled. Harry, if you would please, use the Expelliarmus charm on that mannequin with as much force as you can muster, please.”

“Um, ok, Professor, if you say so.”

Harry took out his wand and took a dueling stance. He took a deep breath and let it out. He pictured in his mind’s eye a dark wizard preparing to cast a curse at his classmates. He felt a tingling in his hand. He waved the wand and shouted,

“EXPELLIARMUS!”

The result was spectacular to say the least. The air between the tip of Harry’s wand and the mannequin appeared to burn a bright blue. The mannequin slammed against the stone wall and shattered into hundreds of shards that sprayed around the far end of the room. The sound was like a small clap of thunder. Harry stood dumbfounded as he looked at the damage he had caused. He was afraid to turn around.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. As you can see, class, the use of unrestrained power can have dire consequences. As you progress through the year, this will become more and more important. Now, why don’t you all pitch in and levitate those fragments into the rubbish bin over there. Harry, if you would, please?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said as he slowly turned away from the wreckage his stunned classmates were starting to clear up.

“As I said, my boy, we have some things to work on. I hope that my doing it this way hasn’t upset you but I could talk to you for hours and it wouldn’t mean as much as a simple demonstration.”

Harry doubted that this was a simple demonstration but he understood what Professor Flitwick was driving at. He just nodded.

“Good. I’d also ask you not to make use of your wand without my direct supervision for a while, unless it’s an emergency. We don’t want any accidents, alright?”

“Yes, sir, I understand.”

“Very good. Now, I’ll ask you a question. How do you think you can best deal with this?”

Harry sat on the edge of a desk and looked down at the floor for a moment. Behind him he could hear the sound of small bits of wood being dropped into the trash bin and the murmur of students casting the Wingardium Leviosa spell. He thought about his ideas on imagery and looked back at the little wizard.

“Well, sir, over the summer I had some success in using images in my mind to deal with some complex magical issues.”

He went on to explain the work he had done with Dr. Medford in taming the last little shred of Tom Riddle and the ideas he had about using it for other situations.

“Yes, Harry,” Professor Flitwick said excitedly. “I think you may have the right of it. Let me consider it and we’ll work on it at the next class. Alright everyone, let’s take our seats and begin our review.”

Ginny came to sit next to Harry and she gave him a questioning look. He smiled back at her and gripped her hand to reassure her that he was ok. She smiled back and they turned their attention to the Professor as he began his review.

The next interesting event was, as could be expected, Harry’s first Defense Against the Dark Arts class for the first years. Harry entered the classroom before the students had arrived and found Bill Weasley waiting for him, standing by the big desk in front of the room.

“Well, Mr. Potter, are you ready?” Bill asked, his scarred face split with a grin.

“Yes, I think so, Professor Weasley, as ready as I’ll ever be.”

“That should be more than sufficient, Harry. Ah, and here they come now.”

The scene could only be described as comical. Two houses of first years, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, timidly walked into the room, with its glass display cases and dragon skeleton hanging from the ceiling. It didn’t help that at the instructors desk was the tall, broad shouldered Bill Weasley, his scarred face and long hair given him an almost wild look. And there was Harry Potter, the Harry Potter, not nearly as tall or imposing looking yet every bit, if not more, awe inspiring. Even the muggleborns knew about him by now. Bill could see their confusion and spoke up,

“Alright everyone, please find your places and settle down. That’s right, all of you come along and last one in close the door. Great, thank you. My name is Professor Bill Weasley and this young man, if you haven’t been paying attention the last couple of days, is Mr. Harry Potter. It will be Mr. Potter’s task to introduce you to the subject of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Despite his age, his experience is unparalleled by all but the most senior Aurors working for the Ministry of Magic. I suggest you pay close attention. What he has to tell you

may save your life some day. Mr. Potter, I leave them in your capable hands.”

“Thank you, Professor Weasley.”

Harry stood next to the desk, looking out over the faces of the first years. He smiled at them and then propped himself on the edge of the desk. He had given this moment some thought.

“The idea of the Dark Arts can conjure up all kinds of images in your mind. Some of you, born of magic families have lived with the idea for a long time, particularly the last couple of years.”

He saw many heads nodding.

“Those of you who come from non-magical families might have a harder time coming to grips with the idea. You might hear the term Dark wizard or witch and think of a movie character or something from an old nursery rhyme. Yes, I know of those things. Although my dad and mum were wizard and witch I was raised by muggles and knew nothing of all this until my letter arrived. Make no mistake, it’s all real. The man who just left received all those scars from a werewolf attack. This scar here was the result of a curse thrown at me by a dark wizard. As you walk around this stately old building you may see a few marks or scars from the largest open contest between the good and evil in the wizarding world in history. I could talk to you until the end of the week, but I think showing you something might mean more. Please leave your books and follow me.”

Harry opened the door and strode out of the room, quickly followed by twenty or so perplexed students. He moved them quickly through the halls and out the front door of the castle, down the road and out through the Hogwarts gate. In a matter of fifteen minutes or so they all stood at the entrance to the memorial park that had been the grounds of the Shrieking Shack. Harry had slipped down after dinner the night before to say his private good byes to so many friends, known and unknown and the one special member of his family.

“This is the last resting place of the final fifty victims of the most evil wizard of this or possibly any generation. This is a hallowed place

and I expect you to conduct yourselves accordingly. Follow me please.”

Harry led them in double line along the path that wound though the grounds. The design of the park had been laid out so that the walkway followed the path of least resistance, around a hill as opposed to over or through it. This allowed for graves to have some space between them and not just placed in a rank and file. Lupin and Tonks had been placed together; most of the others had their solitary place, allowing those who would come to visit to have some privacy. A small stone bench had been placed at each site along with varying flowering bushes, one assumes to provide a favorite color. Familiar names tugged at his heart. When they had completed their tour and once more stood at the entrance to the grounds Harry asked a question.

“How many of you saw the names of family members there?”

Four small hands were raised. So was Harry’s.

“How many saw the names of someone known to you or your family?”

All the magical born students raised their hands. Harry also raised his hand.

“I thought so. This is the lesson I want you to remember. Getting involved with the Dark Arts rarely begins with something big. It usually starts with something small. Being lazy, greedy or looking for revenge for something insignificant. Once it takes hold, it’s hard, very hard, to walk away. It’s up to you to be aware and resist the temptation. All that you see here is the result of something that started small. I trust you understand. At least I hope you do.”

Harry led a very subdued group of boys and girls back up to their classroom.

“Well, we have about fifteen minutes left, does anyone have any questions?”

A small hand was raised in the back of the classroom. Harry pointed and said,

“Yes, what is your question?”

A diminutive girl with long black hair and dark eyes stood up and said in a quiet voice,

“Sir, my name is Abigail Westwood. I come from a non magical family. It really is all true then, isn't it? After I got my letter I started to read about Hogwarts and witches and wizards and such. There were stories about you and what happened when you were a little baby and then stories about your time here at Hogwarts. It's all true, isn't it?”

Her dark eyes were bright and shining, her lower lip had just the hint of a quiver, her hands were clasped together in front of her.

“Well, Miss Westwood, I can't say if everything that you've read is true because some pretty outrageous things have been written about me in the past, but I can tell you that yes, my parents were killed, as were so many others, by an evil wizard who went by the name of Lord Voldemort but who's real name was Tom Riddle. He had many followers and twice he tried to take over the wizarding world. In my time at Hogwarts I've had run-ins with his supporters and with he himself. The last was just this past May and with the help of many wizards and witches he was defeated and destroyed. The damage he has caused the wizarding world is starting to be repaired but will take years to fully erase. You here are a great first step in that work. My hope is that you will all grow to be strong witches and wizards who shun the Dark Arts and do what you can to help the wizarding world grow and prosper. Does that answer your question, Miss Westwood?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” she replied, her voice even lower.

“Well, I guess this would be a good time to wrap things up for today. When we meet next we'll take a look at some of the ways the Dark Arts pop up and the kinds of creatures that make use of them. Class dismissed.”

Harry stood by his desk as the students walked past him, many offering polite good byes. Abigail was the last to leave and she slowed as she approached Harry. Suddenly she darted toward Harry and threw her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his chest. He could hear her crying. He stroked her long hair and tried to soothe her. When he felt she was calming a bit he pried her arms from around him and pushed her back a step so he could look at her face. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

“Miss Westwood, what’s the matter? Don’t you like it here at Hogwarts?”

“Oh, no, sir. I like it here just fine. I’ve always loved the idea of magic and wizards and witches and fairy creatures,” she said through her tears. “That’s why as soon as we knew that my acceptance letter was real, we went to Diagon Alley and bought my books and some extras and I spent the whole rest of the summer reading.”

Harry thought about a first year Hermione who had already amassed an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of wizardry.

“So what’s all this about then?”

Those dark bright eyes fixed on Harry’s bright green ones and after a few sniffles she said,

“I’m an orphan too, Mr. Potter. I live with my granma and granpa and they’re nice enough and all but it’s not the same as having real parents.”

At this point Harry’s throat started to tighten.

“I read the stories about you and what that Wizard Moldywort or whatever his name was did to you and then the newspaper articles. Did you know that someone named Lovegood has a book with all those nasty articles about you and then the one written by some mosquito lady that told the truth? It’s just been so unfair and it made me sad but I wasn’t really sure what was really true, until just today.”

Her eyes began to fill up again as Harry's were beginning to mist over. He pulled the small child close to him and laid his cheek against her hair and held her for a few minutes. Then he picked her up and sat her on his desk. He placed both his hands on her shoulders and looked her right in the eye.

"Abigail, I want you to know how much I appreciate your concern for me. You and I are a lot alike. You want to know something I found out?"

She nodded vigorously.

"You and I are not alone. We belong to a much bigger and special family. The family of witches and wizards. Yes, there are some bad ones out there, but so many, many more are good, decent and kind people. They're like your brothers and sisters, and aunts and uncles, and if you're really lucky you find someone that's like your mum and dad, like I did. You never have to feel alone or sad again. I don't. I have friends and a family that loves me and a very special girl that I hope to spend the rest of my life with. You don't need to feel bad or cry about me ever again. Ok?" He asked with a big smile.

She sniffed and wiped the tears off her face with the back of her hand. She nodded and gave Harry a shy smile.

"So, you mean, it's like you're my big brother?"

"Yes, something like that."

"Wow," was all she said.

"So, you feel better?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ok, well, you can't show up for class looking like that. I'll walk you to the nearest washroom and you can get cleaned up and I'll escort you to your next class. Where are you supposed to be?" he asked her as he helped her down.

“Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall.”

“Yes, ok. Let’s go, shall we.”

So they walked side by side down the corridor, the little first year practically skipping to keep up with Harry. While she was washing her face he stood quietly in the hall thinking about what she had said. He thought about another orphan, his godson, Teddy Lupin and wondered how he was doing. He would send a message by owl tonight to his grandmother. When Abigail came out they proceeded to the Transfiguration classroom. Since Harry had let them go a bit early they arrived only a few minutes late. Harry tapped on the door as he stuck his head in.

“I beg your pardon, Professor.”

“Yes, Mr. Potter, what is it?”

“I needed to have a few words with Miss Westwood, here,” he said as he shooed her in the door. “I apologize for making her late to your class. Please don’t hold it against her.”

“As long as you are vouching for her, I’ll let it go this time. Please don’t make a habit of it, Mr. Potter,” she said, her face stern but Harry was sure he saw an amused smile, just around the corners.

“Thank you, Professor. I won’t.”

As Abigail walked past Harry she looked up at him and mouthed a silent,

“Thank you.”

Harry winked back. He made his way to his next class in a thoughtful mood.

That evening, Harry, Hermione and Ginny were at dinner a bit early and were able to watch the students filing in. A group of Ravenclaw students came in and one was little Abigail. As she walked past she waved and smiled at Harry and said in her quiet voice,

“Hello, Mr. Potter.”

“Hello, Miss Westwood,” Harry replied with a smile.

He watched her as she skipped her way down the aisle to her place at the far end of the Ravenclaw table. When he looked back he found Hermione and Ginny looking at him, questions plain on their faces.

“Her name is Abigail Westwood, a Ravenclaw first year in my DADA class.”

He then proceeded to tell them the story of what went on in class that day concluding with the episode with Abigail in the classroom and then with Professor McGonagall. When he was done, Hermione was all misty eyed and smiling. Ginny had both hands over his right one and said,

“It’s like a day doesn’t go by that I don’t find some new reason to fall in love with you all over again. You were just wonderful with that poor sweet child.”

“Harry the wizard killer has a soft spot after all, huh?” Harry said with a touch of sarcasm.

“Harry, how dare you,” Hermione cut in. “You’ve always had a soft spot. Sometimes it was hidden behind a very thick skull but it was there. It’s better that you care about your students then treat them so horribly like some Professors we’ve had.”

Ginny was looking down the table trying to catch site of the little Ravenclaw but was blocked by all the Gryffindors. Her face was thoughtful. Dinner appeared on the table and the three of them began to eat. Harry and Hermione continued their discussion about teaching which became broad ranging. Ginny ate in silence and kept glancing down the table. When dinner was over and the tables began to empty Ginny gave Harry a kiss on the cheek and said,

“I’ll see you in the tower a little later, ok?”

“Ok, love, I’ll see you later,” Harry replied a little confused.

Then he saw where Ginny was headed and he looked at Hermione and said,

“I think someone just found a big sister. Well, let’s go dig into some of that homework. I thought this was a review week.”

“Harry,” Hermione said with some exasperation. “Homework is the best way to review.”

Harry laughed.

The review week gave way to the start of regular classes and things got really busy. Harry was taking six classes. Potions, Charms, DADA, Transfiguration, Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. The first four were standard Auror training requirements. He felt Herbology would be a good compliment to potions and some plants were dangerous enough by themselves to be used by a Dark Witch or Wizard. He thought Care of Magical Creatures could be of some use since Hagrid would be a font of knowledge about the more aggressive and dangerous critters and it also gave Harry a chance to be around one of his favorite people in all the world. Added to his teaching duties he had a very full schedule as Hermione had first remarked.

Oddly enough, he loved it. Without the stress of life and death situations and dark prophecies he was able to immerse himself in the study of magic from so many aspects and it fascinated him. All the topics had relevancy, they fit into a pattern that was shaping itself in his mind. Even Hermione, the quintessential student was astounded at how Harry was able to absorb and process everything that was coming his way. His ideas about imagery were paying benefits in Charms, helping him master his control of his prodigious magical strength. He never got a potion wrong and Professor McGonagall could hardly recognize him as the unruly sidekick of Ron Weasley who like as not would put legs on a tea cup. And it was all fun.

The second Saturday after the official start of school was the day to try out for the house Quidditch teams. Gryffindor had the pitch after Ravenclaw so Harry was sitting in the stands with the other Gryffindor hopefuls watching the tail end of their tryouts. He noticed that there were several strong players in the sky for Ravenclaw including a very good seeker. Ginny was there as well.

"Their seeker looks pretty good," he said to her.

"Yeah, so does their keeper and one chaser. They should have a strong team this year if they can get any production from the rest of the squad," Ginny replied.

"Hey, looks like they're done. Ok, Gryffindors, hit the pitch."

This was said by the team captain for the Gryffindors, a sixth year named Ernestine Applebee. She insisted on being called Bee, don't dare call me Ernie. As Harry and Ginny walked passed she dropped into step with them.

"I still don't get it, Harry. Why aren't you captain?" Bee asked him.

"Simple, Bee, I turned it down. It's too much work on top of what I've got going now. You're the perfect choice, a reserve chaser as a first year, you've got lots of experience, your OWLs are behind you and no NEWTs this year. I'll be happy just making the squad so I can get some time in on my broom."

Bee snorted as if to say, 'like there's any way you'd not make the team'. As they walked past the group of Ravenclaws who were watching a small voice called out.

"Hi, Mr. Potter, hiya Ginny."

"Hello, Abigail," they replied in unison.

"Good luck," she piped.

"Hey," a Ravenclaw second year said, "you don't wish luck to someone from another team."

"I can if I want to," she retorted, "we're all one family."

And then she stuck her tongue out at her housemate. Harry and Ginny laughed as they walked onto the pitch.

"Ok everyone, into the air, get warmed up and let's see how you fly."

Harry's Firebolt was the class of the day followed not too far behind by Ginny's Nimbus 2001. Harry had noticed a few 2000s but most of the brooms were lower model Comets and the like. Once Harry felt he had the kinks worked out he kicked it into high gear and took some flat out laps of the Pitch. His turns were so fast and tight he was literally laid over on his side. He then straightened out and power climbed until the field below looked like a child's sand box and the air was biting cold. He rolled over and power dived, the wind whipping past his ears with the sound of a freight train. He pulled up when he was level with the upper boxes and could hear the yells and screams from the stands. He did a power slide turn and came to a hover over the goals at one end of the pitch. He sat and watched as the others went through their paces, Ginny looking particularly flight ready. Bee waved them in. When they were hovering in a circle above mid field, she looked at him and said,

"Good grief, Harry. That was a sight to see. I don't think I've ever seen anyone that fast. Do you think you can snare a snitch going that fast?"

"I dunno, Bee. I was just stretching out my broom and showing off I guess," he said with a laugh. "Let's get the snitch out and see what's what."

'What' lasted for about two hours. While Ginny and the other prospective chasers worked on ball handling, blocking and scoring, Harry and one other seeker candidate were chasing a practice snitch high above. It was no contest. Harry was faster, quicker and had a better eye. Meanwhile, Ginny, relying on the skills honed by Kreacher's practice sessions was running circles around most of the chaser hopefuls. By the end of the two hour session it was pretty clear that Harry and Ginny would be on the team, if not the outright

stars. Bee was a very effective chaser as well and there were two who could fill the third chaser spot. Jerry something or other, as Ginny had called him was back as a sixth year for one beater spot. Bee would need to select a second beater and the keeper from the group of hopefuls. While no one stood out there were some solid looking players with which to work. Bee was obviously very pleased.

“Harry, you’re a lock for seeker. I just hope you leave us some time to actually play,” she said with a laugh. “And Ginny, you were good in the past but good grief, what were you doing this summer? I couldn’t believe some of those exchanges you were making.”

“That’s thanks to my personal coach. If you’re interested I think we can persuade him to help us out.”

“Really? Wow, that would be great. Who is it?”

“That’s our little secret, you can meet him tonight after dinner,” Harry chimed in.

“Jerry, you’re back as one of our beaters. I still have to decide on the second and our keeper and the third chaser. Great job everyone. I’ll post the roster before breakfast in the morning. Hit the showers.”

Harry looked at Ginny and winked, she nodded back and as the rest of the flyers dropped to the ground to get ready for lunch, Harry and Ginny zoomed back up into the sky and did a series of barrel rolls and loops and in general just had a really good time flying together. After another twenty minutes they came in for a landing, laughing and hugging. As they made their way to the exit from the Pitch Harry could see Abigail sitting on the first row of seats looking at them, her eyes wide, her smile bright.

“Hello, Abigail,” Harry called to her. “You like Quidditch?”

“I’ve never seen it played, Mr. Potter. But I do love to watch people fly on the brooms,” she said, her quiet voice full of excitement.

“Have you had your first flying lesson yet?” Harry asked, already knowing the answer.

“Oh, yes, sir. But I’m not very good. Madame Hooch says I’ll get better as I get bigger.”

“Well, then I’m sure you will, nobody knows as much about flying as Madame Hooch.”

“I bet you could teach people how to fly really good. You were amazing up there.”

“Well, actually that’s not really true, Abigail. In fact, Ginny would be a much better flying teacher than I would.”

“Harry, how can you say that?” Ginny said incredulously. “You can fly rings around me on my best day.”

“I think you’re exaggerating more than just a little, Ginny. But I didn’t say you were a better flyer. I said you’d be a better teacher. When I first saw you fly you were good, not great, but good. But you’ve worked and worked and got better and better. I’ve never had to really figure out what it takes to fly well, I just could do it. You’d know how to explain the techniques better because you’ve had to think your way through them to get better.”

“I guess I never thought of it that way, Harry. You might be right about it after all,” Ginny said thoughtfully.

She looked up at Abigail and smiled, “If you need any help or anything, you let me know, ok.”

“Ok, Ginny, thanks a lot.”

Harry and Ginny smiled and waved at Abigail as they walked off the pitch and she waved back enthusiastically. Ginny took Harry’s arm in both her hands and pulled him down a bit so she could kiss his cheek.

“She’s a special little girl, isn’t she, Harry?”

“Yes, she is. Something about those eyes that just look right down into your soul.”

"Well, you would be the expert on eyes, Harry," she said looking into his bright green ones.

He could only smile and give her a quick kiss. They walked hand and hand back up to the castle, their brooms over their shoulders. They left their brooms and practice robes in the common room closet and hurried down to make sure they got lunch. A number of students were calling to Harry.

"Great flying, Harry." and "Way to fly, Harry."

He could only assume that his high altitude antics were visible from the castle grounds. He looked at Ginny, his face pinkish with embarrassment. She could only laugh and shake her head. Hermione was sitting at the Gryffindor table by herself but she looked pleased.

"Harry, Ginny, sit down. So how did it go this morning? I know Harry has been up to his old tricks but how did your tryouts go?"

"Great, Hermione," Ginny replied. "Harry is in as seeker and I'm a chaser. Ernestine Applebee is the captain and one of the other chasers. Jerry, um, something or other, is a beater. The others haven't been decided yet. And yes, Harry was up to his old tricks. He had that broom doing some pretty amazing things. And look at him; he's all red in the face. That's something new, a show off that gets embarrassed."

"I am not a show off. I just felt really good this morning being out there and I just wanted to fly. I would think that you of all people would understand just wanting to fly," he said with some asperity.

"Oh, my dear," Ginny said soothingly. "Yes I do know and I did my share of it, too. I just love to be able to tease my hero, you know that."

"Yes, I do know, my redheaded beauty. And it's not so bad really. Give people something to talk about besides my shredding that mannequin in Charms. It was all you heard for a week."

"Well, you have to admit, Harry, it was pretty spectacular," Hermione said. "I don't think I've ever heard or read about such a thing."

"I guess," Harry responded. "Anyway, you're looking awfully cheerful this morning. What's up?"

"I was down in Hogsmeade this morning. Ron and George were working on the store. They are just about ready to open. And they had some help," she smirked.

"What do you mean? Who was helping?" asked Ginny.

Hermione leaned in and whispered, "Angelina Johnson was there lending a hand and she and George were very friendly, if you get my drift."

"Really, oh wow, that's so cool," Ginny said.

"Well, they've known each other a long time, all those years on the team together. Maybe it's not a bad idea to be friends for a while first. Some people just take time to discover it's more than just friendship," Harry said looking right at Hermione who started blushing.

Harry laughed and started to serve himself and Ginny lunch. Hermione decided to change the subject and began to talk about homework. The three spent the rest of the day wading through the copious pile.

They had settled into a steady routine. Classes took up their daytime hours. After the tryouts they added Quidditch practice three days a week for an hour and half. While it was hard work, the physical exercise helped relieve the stress of studies for Harry and Ginny while Hermione found time to visit Ron in Hogsmeade. The Weasley brothers had faced a delay getting some of their items manufactured due to the disruption caused by Voldemort and his followers. This delayed their opening but they were finally able to get things ready for their grand opening on the first Saturday of October. Harry, of course, was invited as a special guest. Argus Filch had already posted a notice on the message board that any Weasley Wizard Wheeze product found on school grounds would be confiscated. This would

prove to only exacerbate the problem as anything Filch didn't want in the school must have been worth having.

To say the opening was a success was an understatement. Since this was the first Saturday that the full school, minus first and second years was allowed into Hogsmeade. The store was mobbed from the moment it opened its doors until they sold out all their stock by mid afternoon. Despite his status as a special guest and silent partner, Harry found himself pitching in and moving stock from the storeroom, collecting money from sales and trying to maintain order. Ginny, Hermione and Angelina were pressed into service as well. By the time they pushed the last of the customers out of the door and locked it, they were all exhausted.

They were all sitting around the now empty store, the bare shelves testimony to the success of the day, and the likelihood of chaos in and around the school. George and Ron were understandably overjoyed.

"Well, mate," Ron said to Harry, "I think it's correct to say your investment is safe. It just took a little while to realize it."

"What do you mean, Ron, his investment?" Hermione asked.

"Harry gave George and Fred the thousand galleons he got from the TriWizard Tournament to get things started. He's a silent partner in the stores."

Hermione, Ginny and Angelina all looked at Harry and he just shrugged.

"I didn't feel right about taking the money after what happened. I tried to give it to the Diggory's but they wouldn't take it. I figured this was the best use to put it to."

"Yeah, and he's not even taking back his profits."

"George!" Harry groaned.

"What? Harry, is this like the Firebolt II deal?" Ginny asked.

“Geez, you guys. It’s impossible to keep a secret around here.”

“Spill it, mate. We’re all friends here.”

Harry just waved at Ginny to go ahead and tell the story. She told in fulsome detail the story of Harry meeting Mr. Pinewood on the pavement outside the Quidditch Supply store and Harry agreed to allow his name to be used and the money that the Nimbus Company offered him was to be placed in the relief fund that the Ministry was using to help Voldemort’s victims. Ron nodded and added that he and George were talking to Harry late in the summer about formalizing their business relationship and he told them that the agreement was this. Fifty percent of Harry’s portion of the profits would be placed in his account at Gringotts. The other half would go directly into the Ministry relief fund. Once his thousand galleon investment was paid off, all his profits would go to the Ministry fund. Harry sat closed mouth as his financial arrangements were laid bare.

“Harry,” Angelina said. “If you’re so intent on providing all this money to the relief fund, which is bloody brilliant by the way, why take back your investment?”

“I have very special plans for that money,” was all he said.

It was obvious that Harry was very upset right now and Ginny felt pain that was almost physical when she knew he was unhappy. She moved closer to him and took hold of his arm and looked at his clouded eyes.

“Why are you so upset, sweetheart? These are wonderful things you are doing. And we’re all your friends. Hell, we’re family. Why can’t we share this with you?”

“You want to know why? I’ll tell you why, and then I don’t ever want to have to talk about it again, ever,” he snapped back.

His arms were folded across his chest and he was staring at some point on the wall across from him. Then he looked at Ginny and his eyes softened a bit but his face was still set.

“When Voldemort killed my parents all I was left with was a vault full of money that I didn’t know I had until I was eleven. When Sirius died, I was left a bigger vault full of money that I didn’t know I had until this past summer. It was every thing the Blacks had and you can imagine where that came from over the years. I lost the most important people in my life at the time and all I was left with was money. Even after I watched Cedric Diggory killed I was left with a bag full of Galleons and I had no idea what to do with it. Now I have important people back in my life. I still have a lot of money. Did you know I’m one of the largest single accounts at Gringotts? And now more money will be coming in.”

The look on Ginny’s face told him she didn’t understand where he was trying to go with his explanation. He wasn’t sure himself. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was holding both her hands in his. He was so focused on this girl who was the core of his life, that he wasn’t aware of the impact on the others around him. George and Ron were dumbfounded. Hermione was holding on tightly to Ron, her eyes brimming. Angelina, who was a friend of Harry’s but not fully aware of his past was both confused and upset. She had one hand in George’s and the other was involuntarily reaching toward Harry. He took one more breath and continued,

“I don’t want any more money, Ginny. For me, money equals death. I want life. I want a life with you. We’ll be comfortable but we won’t be rich. All that money is going to be used to help people who have been ruined by Tom Riddle,” Harry said, then looked down into his lap. “I don’t deserve all that money. Other people died for me to have it. I have to find a way to make something good happen with it and this is the only way I can think of right now.”

Ginny was almost in a panic. Harry sounded very much like he did that afternoon back in May when he said he thought he was a fraud. After all the happy times they had over the summer and the first weeks at Hogwarts it was obvious that Harry was still harboring a large amount of pain. Her mother had told her of the talk she had with Harry just before his collapse and it seemed that there was still a deep well of hurt that was coming to the surface. She looked up over Harry’s head and mouthed to her brother George,

“Go get Mum.”

George nodded and got up quietly and moved into the back room where he could Apparate back to the Burrow. His parent should have returned from their vacation trip by now. In the main room of the store the others sat there, Harry with his head bowed over his lap, the others transfixed by the bizarre twist to what had been a very happy day. Ginny was trying to coax him to talk more but he was just sitting there. In the quiet they heard the soft popping sound of someone Apparating into the store room. Ginny saw her mother, looking tan and healthy but with a face that could have been cut from stone. Angelina jumped up and backed away so that Mrs. Weasley could sit next to Harry. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and began to speak softly to him. Mrs. Weasley looked around her and motioned with her head towards the door. Ginny slid her hands from Harry's and stood up, hesitated and then walked out the door ahead of Ron, Hermione and Angelina. George had come around from the side of the store, apparently shooed out the back way by his mother.

Angelina looked bewildered, Ginny heartbroken and Hermione at a complete loss. Ron and George made a great study of the slate walkway.

“I don't understand what's going on. He seemed so happy and full of fun today,” Angelina said softly. “He was joking with the customers, talking about flying with me. What happened to him?”

“Harry bottles so much up, he always has,” Ginny began. “I think he has been genuinely happy but sometimes something will trigger a thought or feeling and everything comes boiling to the surface. There is so much pain, and if you can believe it, guilt. He feels guilty about Fred and Tonks and all the others. I honestly think that he feels guilty that he's alive and all the others are dead. You heard him. He doesn't think he deserves what he has. I just want to scream. Do you know that he found out one of his first year students is a muggle born orphan and he took the time to comfort her because she felt so bad about how unfair his life has been. He was comforting her. He convinced her that she was part of a larger family of witches and

wizards; that he was like her big brother. He can do that for others but he can't do it for himself."

The last was said through a steady stream of tears. Hermione pulled her into a hug and the taller Angelina draped a long arm across the shoulders of each. Ron looked at George,

"This might take some time, maybe we ought to take a walk, you know."

"You might be right," George replied. "Girls, come on, let's take a walk."

Reluctantly the three young women agreed but remained linked arm in arm as they walked down the main street of Hogsmeade. George and Ron walked silently behind them. It was nearly sundown and the five of them were still wandering aimlessly, waiting for some signal from their mother that they should return to the store. The streets and stores were still full of Hogwarts students but no one approached them, sensing something was wrong, and small knots of people were gathered here and there, whispering. Finally, a small pop behind them announced the arrival of Kreacher.

"Master Harry wishes his friends to return to the place called Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, if they so please."

The little house elf popped out of sight. The five hurried toward the store. When they arrived they hesitated to open the door but finally Ginny couldn't wait any longer and slowly pushed it open.

"Come in, children. It's alright," came the voice of Molly Weasley.

As the five young people entered the store they saw Harry standing with his back to them, apparently staring at the wall.

"Harry?" Ginny asked, whole volumes unspoken in that one word.

"I'm sorry, Ginny and I hope that's the last time you ever have to hear me say that. I'm feeling very foolish and ashamed right now. Your mum, our mum actually, says I shouldn't, that you all understand

what I'm going through, but I'm saying I shouldn't be dragging you through it with me. I have so much to be happy about but sometimes it just seems so...so overwhelming."

His head started to droop. Ginny was at his side in several quick steps.

"Look at me, please, Harry. Please, love."

Harry turned and looked down into the face that represented all he wanted out of his life. Ginny reached up and brushed back his unruly hair and ran her hand down the side of his face.

"You don't drag me anywhere, Harry. I walk willingly at your side every step of the way. I intend to share every joy and every sorrow you have or have ever had. And you should never, ever feel ashamed or foolish for telling me how you really feel about anything at anytime. I love you because you are the dearest, sweetest, bravest and now I find the most generous person I could ever expect to know. And if you feel melancholy every now and again that's alright too. You deserve that if nothing else."

Harry didn't speak, he just reached out and took hold of the anchor of his life and pulled her close. Mrs. Weasley watched them closely looking for a sign. The rest just stood and stared, afraid to even breathe. Harry turned to look at them, his arms still around Ginny.

"I won't lie to you and say I'm ok. I'm better but I'm not ok. But I think I can see a way to get there. Angelina, I'm sorry you had to be here for this. These guys are used to my mood swings."

"Harry, we've all been through some petty tough times together. I always thought you were a pretty tough customer, a scrappy little kid who grew up to be the bravest man I'm likely to ever know. You don't have to be sorry for anything. I'm here to help in anyway I can."

"Thanks. Thanks to all of you. Bloody hell, I'm tired. Walk me back to my room?" the last directed at Ginny.

"Of course," she said.

Harry turned to Molly Weasley. He gave her a wan smile and said,

“Thanks, Mum. I’m turning out to be more trouble than all the rest.”

“Oh, Harry darling, you couldn’t do that if you lived two lifetimes. Go and get some rest, have a good lie in and send me an owl in the afternoon and let me know how you feel. I’m for home, I’m sure Arthur is worried. Good night, my dears.”

She gave Angelina a special smile. Then she Apparated home.

“If Harry and Ginny are headed back to the school, what say we go find some dinner, my treat,” offered George.

“That sounds good,” replied Ron. “Harry, sure you’re alright going back, mate.”

“Yeah, Ron, you guys go ahead. Ginny will see to it that I’m ok.”

“Always and forever,” she said.

Harry and Ginny left the store, his arm over her shoulder; hers wrapped tightly around his waist. The others followed them out, George closing and locking the door. They stood on the pavement and watched as Harry and Ginny slowly made their way down the street through the rapidly thinning crowd.

“That’s was scary,” Angelina said quietly, her hand held in George’s.

“Harry and I spent a lot of time together last year,” Hermione said. “He can seem so strong but at the same time he’s so fragile. All these years it was Voldemort as the enemy, now it seems like the enemy is him, attacking from the inside. I feel so helpless.”

They all nodded in agreement and as the object of their attention disappeared from view they shared a collective sigh and went off to find some comfort in a shared meal. Harry and Ginny continued their slow measured pace, barely noticing any of the people that passed them, some offering acknowledgement but most sensing that

something was amiss and passing without comment. The most difficult part of the trip was getting through the Gryffindor common room. A number of students were present and the moment Ginny and Harry came through a chorus of greetings rose up but the look on Harry's care worn face and Ginny's silent promptings from behind him cut them all off. Harry was oblivious to the stares so deep in thought was he. He made his way directly to the staircase with Ginny at his side. Reaching the top, he produced his key and unlocked the door. Ginny hesitated then followed him through, shutting the door behind them. Harry kicked off his shoes and climbed up on his bed, lying on his back, his head on the pillow.

"Ginny?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Would you mind staying for a while?"

"Of course, Harry, for as long as you want."

Harry held out one hand and Ginny quietly moved to the bedside and took his hand. He gave a gentle tug and she responded by lying down at his side wrapping her arm across his chest with her head on his shoulder. He wrapped her in both his arms and held on tight for a moment and let his grasp relax. He closed his eyes. He was physically exhausted from the work at the store and emotionally drained from his black mood. But his mind wasn't ready for sleep yet. He hovered in that twilight place between sleep and being fully awake. He stepped through the events of the day. It had been a lot of fun in the shop. Crazy, and full of manic energy but fun. Why was it then that he had sunk so deep so fast over the mention of money? Everything he said about it was true; he did equate his growing fortune with the deaths of those family and friends. Was Mrs. Weasley right? Did he feel guilty about being alive and being the object of such good fortune while others lay dead or lived in ruin? He was fortunate, it was true. He had gained a family and a future and the beginnings of a plan to help those who had lost so much. But did he deserve that good fortune? Mrs. Weasley had gently tried to argue with him that he above just about anyone else deserved whatever good life brought his way after what he had been through. That he

needed to stop punishing himself and accept what came his way and do what he could to help those less fortunate.

It all made perfect sense, of course, but why then the ease with which he slipped into such despondency. As a result of his practice with the idea of imagery to help control his magical ability he found he almost always slipped into that mode when he thought about anything for more than a moment. He did so now. The darkness behind his eyes lightened a bit and what he saw was a short dark corridor with a deeper blackness beyond. He smiled a little inwardly. They did call it the pit of despair after all. And the path was an easy one to follow. Should he just wall it off? Turn it off like he did with the little piece of Riddle on Uncle Vernon's TV?

No, that didn't seem right. Bottling all that emotion up wasn't the way. But what would be? As he sought a solution he felt Ginny shift and squeeze him a bit. The answer became obvious. Just in front of the entrance to that dark tunnel and off to the side a bit he firmly fixed in his mind's eye the face that never ceased to quicken his pulse and he imagined that face as he remembered it after Ginny took her first flight on her Nimbus 2001, the wide grin, the dancing eyes and the long tussled hair. As that face took shape, the image of the tunnel faded, grew gray instead of black, and while it didn't disappear it no longer seemed so ominous. The pit would not disappear but it would never again beckon so strongly nor intrude so darkly. From that moment forward for the rest of his life he would never again slip into such a dark place. Times of sadness, certainly, especially during special occasions where familiar faces were absent but the times of darkness were over. He let out a long sigh and slipped into a deep dreamless sleep. Ginny could sense the transition and she too sighed and snuggled in tighter and drifted off to sleep.

Sometime around midnight Harry stirred and felt the warm, comforting weight of Ginny still at his side. He smiled. He was feeling better. He closed his eyes and went to that place and found her smiling face there waiting for him. He opened his and said,

"Ginny? Ginny. Wake up, love."

"HmMMM? Harry? What is it, are you alright?"

"Yes, I think so; I think I'm really alright. Thanks for sticking with me tonight, but I think you should get to your room. Imagine what people would say."

"They'd say what they already say, what a lucky girl I am," she said lightly then kissed his cheek.

"Do they? Well, that's only half the story because I'm a very lucky guy but you still need to go."

"I know, but before I do," she said.

She snaked her way up a little higher on his shoulder and with his face turned towards her she leaned in and kissed him. It was one of the long slow passionate kisses that Harry would remember and look forward to all his life. He responded and it was some minutes before they finally pulled apart. She gave him an arch look and said,

"Yes, I'd say you are feeling better. I'll go now but remember what Mum said, sleep in and I'll see you when you get up, ok?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a little smile and he watched her as she got up and moved to the door. She turned and blew him a kiss and then quietly left the room. He lay back looking up at the ceiling beams. He knew he would sleep more but for the now he just wanted to enjoy the moment. He knew he would need to send a message to Mrs. Weasley, letting her know how he was doing but he had some other messages to send off. He wondered if there would be someone at Gringotts on a Sunday. He had ideas and he needed some advice and that was the first place he could think of to get it. It was around one in the morning when he drifted off to sleep again.

In the meantime Ginny had made her way down the stairs to the common room. She thought she was going to just make her way back up the stairs to her own dormitory room but there sitting in the big overstuffed chair by the low fire was Hermione. She had been reading a book and looked up as Ginny came down the last flight of stairs.

“How is he?” she asked

“He says he’s better. When we got back he asked me to stay for a while. So we wound up just cuddled up on his bed, you know. He was lying on his back with his eyes closed and I was just holding on to him, to be there for him. After a while he just let out a long sigh and drifted off to sleep. It was like all the tension went out of him. He woke me up just a little bit ago and told me I should get to my own room or people would talk. But he sounded better, you know, happier. I guess we’ll see in the morning. I reminded him he’s to sleep in as best he can. What do you think?”

“I think he’s felling better. He might try to fool someone else, but not you, not after today. But like you said, we’ll just have to keep an eye on him and see. And you and I should get to bed as well; it’s been a very long day.”

Ginny simply nodded and she and Hermione made their way up the stairs and to their rooms. Hermione was able to get to sleep very quickly, Ginny however was bombarded with questions from her roommates and it took some time before she was able to sleep.

Harry was, if nothing else, a very resilient young man. By the time he awoke that Sunday, late in the morning, he was feeling much better. He found his clothes and bathing kit laid out and concluded he definitely needed a shower. As he made his way down the staircase the few Gryffindors still in the common room eyed him warily so he went out of his way to smile and say ‘good morning’. This gesture was greeted with looks of relief and cheerful responses. By the time he was showered and dressed it was time for lunch and Harry made his way to the Great Hall. Fortunately the senior end of the Gryffindor table was very close to the entrance door. He could see Ginny and Hermione already there so he moved quickly and sat down next to Ginny before anyone could really notice.

“Harry,” Ginny squealed in surprise and joy. She threw her arms around Harry’s neck and held him tightly. Harry looked over her shoulder at a smiling Hermione and said,

"I think she's glad to see me."

"We both are. How are you feeling, Harry?"

"Good, real good, thanks. I slept a lot and had some time to think and get things straight in my head. I feel a lot better. Plus I'm starving, I skipped dinner last night."

Ginny released her hold on Harry's neck and pulled back a bit. She gave him a brief warm kiss and then began filling his plate with the offerings from the table.

"Then you better eat, Harry. Mum'll have my head if she finds out you're going hungry," she said with a mischievous smile.

Although he tried not to pay much attention he could tell that people were trying to covertly observe him. It was obvious that his return to the school had been the cause of some discussion. So as he did in the Gryffindor common room, he made an effort to smile and if he caught the eye of someone he knew, to wave or otherwise acknowledge them. Hermione took notice and asked,

"What's with you, Harry?"

"I'm sure my return last night in a big blue funk didn't go unnoticed, especially by anyone in the Gryffindor common room, so I'm just trying to let my improved mood show a bit."

"Not a bad idea really," Ginny said with approval. "You should have heard all the questions I had to answer when I got to my room last night. This morning at breakfast was no better. Uh, Harry, less smiling, more eating. Ok, sweetie?"

Harry snorted but resumed shoveling in the remainder of the steak and kidney pie that Ginny had heaped on his plate. As he finished up the last morsel and pushed his plate away he had to admit he felt much better for the meal.

"Any plans for the day, Harry?" Ginny asked.

“Well, first I have to write out a couple of messages, the first to Mum to let her know I’m ok and then another to Gringotts. I have a couple of ideas and I’m going to them to get some information. If I’m going to be burdened with all this money I might as well put it some good use.”

Despite repeated questions the two girls couldn’t get any more information out of him but it was obvious he was in good spirits and it was getting contagious.

“After that I thought I’d like to do some flying. Would you care to come along, Ginny? How about you, Hermione?”

Although Harry’s face showed nothing but sincere consideration underneath he knew that the one thing in the wizarding world that Hermione had not then, did not now, and most likely never would, enjoy was flying on a broom, or a Hippogriff for that matter. She looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“Very amusing, Mr. Potter. You know full well my feelings about flying on those things.”

“Yes, I believe I remember you screaming something about it in my ear once. So I guess that’s a no.”

“Hmm, correct. I will be here later though if you two would care to do some homework.”

“Yes, that would be a good idea, too,” Ginny agreed.

“Sounds ok to me,” Harry agreed, “but first those messages.”

Hermione made a little sound of exasperation and hauled her bag up onto the table. She pulled out a quill, ink bottle and several sheets of parchment. Harry looked at Ginny and smirked,

“She’s a handy girl to have around, isn’t she?”

“Yes, indeed.”

They all laughed and then Harry got down to writing. His letter to Mrs. Weasley read,

Dear Mum,

I wanted you to know that I'm feeling fine, much better then yesterday. I had the chance to think about what you said, and have been saying, and you were right. I can accept how things are and work on ways to make what might be better. I have some ideas and will work on them. Hope to see you soon.

Love from your non redheaded son,

Harry.

He let Ginny see this message and she gave him a smile. She then laughed and said,

"You know she's just gonna cry all over that parchment, Harry."

"I'm betting she smiles."

"She can do both, you know."

The other message he kept hidden from the girls as best he could and at one time had to fight Ginny off as she tried to pry his arm away. Hermione had to rescue the ink bottle from being spilled.

"Really, you two, everyone is looking."

"Good, then maybe they'll stop thinking Harry is some kind of basket case."

Harry looked at Ginny and said,

"Who thinks I'm a basket case?" he said.

"A few people this morning were commenting, that's all," replied Ginny. "Oh, Harry, I almost forgot, you should have heard Abigail. She was standing off to the side trying to hear what we were saying

about you and when someone made some crack about you going bonkers she tore into him like you wouldn't believe. Poor guy almost fell all over himself trying to calm her down and apologize. You have got one very big fan there."

Harry could only smile and he tried to look down toward the end of the Ravenclaw table. Through the gaps in the thinning ranks of the Gryffindors still at the table, Harry could make out the small form and long dark hair of little Abigail.

"I'll be right back," he said as he stood up but he took the Gringotts message with him.

Ginny and Hermione looked at each other and shrugged. Harry made his way down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw table. He could hear some whispers as he passed but he ignored them. He was nearly there when Abigail turned and saw him coming. Her face lit up with a smile but there was a question there as well.

"Hello, Miss Westwood."

"Hello, Mister Potter. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling much better, thank you. Had a bit of a rough patch yesterday but that's all over with. I understand I have you to thank for this morning."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I hear you came to my defense after someone questioned my sanity."

"Oh, that, that was just some silly boy from Slytherin trying to be clever. It didn't work and I just told him so. It was nothing really," she said brightly.

"Well it was more than nothing to me and I wanted to thank you for it. How is your flying coming along?"

“Ok, I guess, well maybe not so ok. I’m still having trouble getting the broom to do what I want it to do.”

“I’m sure Madame Hooch can help you get it straightened out but if you think you’d like some more help, Ginny Weasley and I will be down at the Quidditch pitch in a little while. If you happened to be there I’m sure she would be glad to give you some pointers.”

“Oh, that would be great, thank you, sir.”

“Not a problem, Miss Westwood. See you later.”

As Harry turned to rejoin Ginny and Hermione, he heard a Ravenclaw second year sitting across the table say,

“Abby, the teacher’s pet.”

Before Abigail could respond Harry turned and pinned the youngster with a green eyed stare.

“In my years here at Hogwarts,” he began quietly “it has been my great privilege to have known several of the faculty very well. They are largely responsible for my still being alive and able to stand here and talk to you. I strongly suggest you consider the example Miss Westwood is setting and take your education here at Hogwarts more seriously. Am I’m making myself clear?”

“Y-yes, sir.” the boy said in near panic.

“Good, have a good afternoon, everyone.”

With that he strode down the aisle where he gathered up his other message and with Ginny and Hermione in tow headed up to the owlry.

“What was all that about, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“I wanted to let Abigail know I was ok and to thank her for what she did this morning. I also asked her about how her flying was coming. When she told me she was still having trouble I let her know Ginny and I would be practicing this afternoon and if she would like some

tips she could come down. As I was leaving a second year called her a teacher's pet and I took a moment to correct his view of things. That's all."

"Harry, you and Ron and the others used to think I was a teacher's pet," Hermione chided him.

"I know, and we were wrong. If Abigail has even the slightest chance of becoming someone like you, Hermione, I'll do all I can to encourage her."

Harry realized that Hermione was no longer walking along beside him. He turned around and saw her standing there staring at him. Ginny stopped as well, holding on to Harry's hand.

"Hermione, what's the matter?" Harry asked.

"How can you do that, Harry? How can you throw off such a wonderful compliment to me and yet you routinely fail to recognize all that is so good in you?"

Harry couldn't answer because he didn't know an answer. He thought he was just stating the obvious.

"You scared the hell out of us yesterday, Harry. And I know you had Ginny twisted in knots that afternoon while you were convalescing. You beat yourself up about things that aren't your doing and don't give yourself any credit for the things you do. You were the first to really be my friend despite my being a prissy little know-it-all. No, don't deny it, I know. You befriended that wonderful child and you hold in your hand a plan to put your fortune to work to revive those closed businesses in Diagon Alley and provide scholarships to Hogwarts."

By this time Hermione had moved to within arms length of Harry, who still stood with his hand being held tightly by Ginny. His mouth was open but the last part surprised him into silence.

"Oh, come on, Harry. I can read upside down very well, even your sloppy scrawl. So let's stop all this nonsense. You can still throw out

all the compliments you want, they feel very good coming from you, but you better start giving some to that face you see in the mirror every morning, ok?"

He reached out with his free hand and pulled Hermione close and held her tight against him. He pressed his cheek against her bushy hair and said,

"Ok, I give in. No more trips to the pit of despair or whatever they call it. And no more whining about why me, I don't deserve it. I kind of came to that conclusion last night. Like I wrote to Mum, Ginny. I'll accept what comes my way and just do what I can to make things better. And when I need some help, I'll look for it from my family and friends. Although, I think in Hermione's case she's more family than friend."

"Congratulations, Hermione, I think we've finally gotten through to him."

"It took him long enough," she said in her best exasperated voice.

They all laughed and then proceeded to the owlry to assure Mrs. Weasley and to begin Harry's campaign to help his wizard family.

Harry's coming to terms with his demons came none to soon. The first Quidditch match of the year, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, was scheduled for the next Saturday. In Harry's opinion the Gryffindor team was the strongest he had ever seen. Based on Ginny's performance at the try outs, Bee had been more than interested in meeting her personal coach. When she was introduced she was less than impressed. Most wizards born to wizarding families considered house elves to be somewhat lesser beings. However, once Harry and Ginny provided a demonstration, she was convinced and ever since Kreacher was present at the Gryffindor practices, sitting unobtrusively in one of the high boxes working his magic on the quaffle and putting the Gryffindor chasers through ever increasingly challenging practices. As individuals and in combination the three chasers learned to anticipate and handle quick changes, loose quaffles and

complex maneuvers. As a bonus, once Kreacher had the chance to observe how the other positions were played he also helped the beaters deal with bludgers and even lent Master Harry a hand with his practice. The results were impressive to say the least. Professor McGonagall herself commented that the team appeared to be superior to anything she had witnessed in all her years at Hogwarts.

The day of the match dawned bright, clear and cool. The Gryffindors were confident but still nervous. No amount of practice, no matter how effective, guaranteed success. After a quiet breakfast, they trooped down to the Quidditch pitch to get ready. The student body likewise was headed to the stadium, excited about the first fully fledged Quidditch match in nearly two years. Both teams were circling the pitch, stretching their wings as it were, and getting themselves ready to play. When it was time, Madame Hooch gave the first signal to get into position. When all were ready she released the balls and play began.

As seeker Harry's one and only concern was catching the snitch. An ancillary concern was avoiding a bludger but his was a more singular task. The snitch had quickly disappeared after it was released so Harry took a quick climb to a suitable altitude and began to circle the pitch. From up here he could steal the occasional glimpse at how the game was going down below. He could also hear the announcer, a fifth year Slytherin with a powerful speaking voice that was amplified by a Sonorous spell. Within minutes it was obvious that it was going to be a rout. Gryffindor was up by 80 points to nil and it seemed Ginny was doing most of the damage with Bee adding a couple of goals as well. The Ravenclaw seeker was frantically searching for the snitch, as their only hope was to catch the snitch before the lead exceeded one hundred and forty points. Harry caught a glint of gold near the Ravenclaw goal and he kicked his Firebolt into a steep dive.

He caught the Ravenclaw seeker cold and he was rocketing toward the snitch. It made a quick move taking it behind the goal and Harry had to peel off, just in time to avoid being hit by the quaffle as it was fired in by Bee for the ninth goal. Harry climbed and rolled to try and re-establish contact with the snitch. Having been behind him, the Ravenclaw seeker was in a better position to see where the snitch went and he had thrown his broom into a skidding turn around the

goal posts and was hot on the snitches tail. Harry kicked his broom over into another dive and with the superior speed of the Firebolt he was soon neck and neck with his opponent and was closing on the snitch. The snitch then made a sharp turn skyward and rocketed away. Harry pulled back on the handle and urged his broom skyward. He had the broom almost vertical in its climb while the other seeker had to take a less steep climb for altitude. Harry was starting to feel the broom lose the battle with gravity and was slowing when the snitch decided to reverse course and began diving toward the earth. Harry then threw the broom over and began a power dive right behind it. As he came back into range of the announcer's voice he was able to hear him comment on the high altitude battle.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what a performance, the Gryffindor seeker is putting on a World Cup class show for us today. He's diving on the snitch now while the Ravenclaw seeker tries to close the distance but he just doesn't have the speed. Ok, Potter is pulling out and leveling off as the snitch appears to heading for the far end of the pitch...Holy cow, fans, did you see that? I wouldn't have thought it possible but Potter has just reversed course and gone into a dive within a brooms length, how did he do it...wait, Weasley scores again, it's now one hundred and forty to nil."

What had gotten the announcer so excited was when Harry had been flat out about one hundred feet above the ground chasing the snitch it suddenly reversed course again and dived below Harry. Without even thinking about it, Harry pushed down and wrenched sideways on the broom while pushing the visual idea of what he was trying to do right to the broom. The result was the broom digging its nose in and pitching it's back end over in an arc while twisting 180 degrees around its long axis. This left Harry facing the other direction and pointed at the ground at a shallow angle. He put everything he could into the broom and he tore after the fleeing snitch, his robes straight out behind him, the wind rushing past him so hard he couldn't hear over it. The Ravenclaw seeker tried to pull his broom around but it skidded wildly and into the path of one of his own beaters. They collided with a sickening thud, but managed to stay airborne. Meanwhile the snitch pulled level only a dozen feet above the ground and Harry was right behind it, his fingers outstretched, and with one more burst his hand closed around it. As he did he realized he was

within yards of the far wall behind the Gryffindor goal. He hauled back on the stick and rocketed skyward again clearing the wall by just a few feet. The stadium went berserk. He continued to climb and then did a couple of victory rolls before diving for the ground. He could see that his team had already landed and were huddled together jumping up and down and hugging each other.

Harry pulled to a halt next to Madame Hooch and handed her the snitch. His face was red from the wind and his smile wide and his eyes bright. Madame Hooch was looking at him in amazement.

“Good lord, Potter. That was amazing. How did you pull off that move? You should have come completely adrift.”

“Well, ma’am, I think that’s because the broom handle was trying to split me in two so I was sort of stuck right on,” he laughed and so did she.

By this time the rest of the team had come up to Harry and were swarming around him. The final score was 320 to nil. Ginny had scored 120 out of the 170 goal points and she looked fit to burst. The field celebration went on for some minutes until fans from the stands found their way onto the pitch and picked up the seven players and carried them from the field and all the way to the Gryffindor common room. As they were given the seats of honor in the large stuffed chairs around the fire, the din was overwhelming. About a half an hour into the celebration the Fat Lady swung open and Bill Weasley was climbing through the hole. He then turned and helped Professor McGonagall make her way through. It got pretty quiet.

“Well, it would appear that congratulations are in order. That was a truly masterful performance. Well done, Miss Applebee. You have that team doing amazing things,” Professor McGonagall said. “Potter, Miss Weasley, your flying was magnificent, the best I’ve seen in years.”

“Ginny, Harry, it was truly spectacular. I could not believe that reverse dive you pulled off, Harry. Not even Charlie could have made that move. How’d you do that?” Bill asked.

"I just pulled hard and thought harder and it went where I wanted," Harry said with shrug.

"Well, Mr. Potter it was truly inspired flying however you did it," Professor McGonagall added. "I'd also like to take a moment to make an announcement that will affect Gryffindor. I received word from the Board of Governors that my appointment as Head of Hogwarts has been approved effective immediately."

It got pretty loud. The students cheered and applauded and crowded around the Professor to wish her well. She smiled and her eyes got misty. She held up her hands for quiet.

"Thank you. You can't imagine how this makes me feel. In addition, for the rest of the year, Professor Weasley will be head of Gryffindor house."

This set off another round of applause. Bill got a big hug from his little sister and Hermione and handshakes from Harry and many of the other Gryffindors. The new school Head looked at Bill and said,

"Well, Professor I leave you to your house, try not to let things carry on too long."

"Yes, Headmistress, we'll keep it to a dull roar," replied the acting head of house.

Bill assisted Professor McGonagall back out through the portal and then came back in to congratulate each team member individually and meet the other students personally. Someone managed to get food brought up from the Great Hall. Harry had his suspicions about that. All in all it was a terrific day. The celebration lasted until just before dinner at which point the entire house marched down to the Great Hall. The Ravensclaws were understandably subdued but they showed good grace when the jubilant Gryffindors made their entrance. Harry made some points when he sought out their seeker and offered a sincere 'well flown'. Professor McGonagall gaveled the assembled students to silence.

“Yes, yes, well played Ravenclaw and Gryffindor and congratulations to Gryffindor for the victory. Now before we begin our dinner I have two announcements to make. The Board of Governors has communicated to me today their decision to make my appointment as school Head official and permanent.”

Once more there was thunderous applause. Professor McGonagall gaveled for quiet.

“Thank you, and I have appointed Professor Bill Weasley as head of Gryffindor house.”

And again, the applause was loud as Bill was proving to be a very popular teacher, with his frank, practical approach to DADA after so many years of problematic instructors. Of course the Gryffindors were the loudest and most raucous. The new Head gaveled them quiet aided by some hand signals from Bill.

“The second announcement is that as a way to celebrate getting things back to some normalcy here and to thank all the students and faculty for all the hard work I’ve seen so far, the usual Halloween dinner will be expanded into more of a party to include music and dancing. For those of you who remember the TriWizards Tournament ball, this will be a bit less formal and open to the entire school. Further details will be posted on the memorandum board as they become available. That’s all for tonight, enjoy your dinner.”

“Wow, a dance, won’t that be great, Hermione?”

“It will if I can get Ron to come. He’s not exactly big on dancing.”

“Not many boys are but I bet you can convince him. How about you, my hero? Brave enough to dance with me?” Ginny teased Harry.

“You’re the one who’s going to have to be brave, Ginny. Your toes will be in deadly peril the entire night,” he laughed.

“Harry, are you going to tell me after that display of aerial ballet you put on this morning that dancing is going to be a problem?”

“A world of difference, my sweet, but you know that if you want to go, I’ll go. Besides, it’ll give you a chance to show off your new dress robes.”

Ginny’s eyes were dancing and her smile was wide. The prospect of a party with dancing seemed to be more popular with the witches than the wizards. As the students ate there were a number of conversations both pro and con about the prospects. Harry was glad that at least this time he wouldn’t have to worry about finding a date. But he held no illusions about his ability to dance. He would definitely need some help, and an idea began to dawn on him. As dinner was coming to an end, Harry excused himself and went up to where most of the faculty was still lingering over a last cup of tea or coffee. Harry motioned to Bill Weasley and when he came over started to talk to him in low tones. When Harry was done, Bill nodded once and smiled and clapped Harry on the shoulder. When Harry came back to the table, Ginny was looking at him with raised eyebrows. Harry’s face was the picture of innocence.

Harry was finishing his breakfast the next morning when his barn owl deposited a large scroll in front of him. He accepted the few scraps of bacon that Harry had left on his plate then flew off to the owlry.

“What did you get, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“It’s from Gringotts. They know who owns two of the shops that are still closed in Diagon Alley. They both are interested in reopening but lack the resources to do so. They’ve started talking to them. But no one has any trace of the Fortescues. It doesn’t look like poor Florean had any close relatives. It’s a start at least.”

Ginny just smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. Harry smiled back and then saw Bill Weasley standing at the entrance to the Hall. He got up and walked over to him, again they talked in low tones and both walked away with smiles. Harry went back to Ginny and said he needed to go and do some work for class and would she meet him for lunch.

“Of course, Harry.”

She couldn't be entirely sure but she suspected Harry was up to something. When they met again for lunch it looked like Harry had been hard at work but he was smiling. The two weeks that followed leading up to the Halloween Party were filled with anticipation, planning and for some, dread. Harry was concentrating on his studies, his class and Quidditch practice. An occasional message from Gringotts arrived and Harry appeared satisfied with the progress that was being made but he was still rather closed mouth about it all.

Ginny was getting more and more excited about the dance and when Harry asked her why, she explained,

“Because, Harry, you and I have never been on an official date, that's why. Sure, we've spent lots and lots of time together but never something like this. I can't wait to walk into the Great Hall on your arm, all done up in my dress robes, you looking all handsome and heroic,” the last said with an impish grin. “These things mean a lot to a girl, Harry.”

“I kind of got that feeling from when we had the TriWizards Tournament, guess I forgot about that. I'll try not to forget about it in the future.”

She stood up on her tip toes and kissed his cheek. When the big day arrived Harry was given explicit instructions to make sure he looked his very best. Kreacher had been a big help in that regard. He made sure that Master Harry's robes were cleaned and neatly pressed, that his dress clothes were likewise cleaned to perfection and his shoes were polished to a gleaming shine. Harry even took the time to shave the little bit of stubble that was starting to show. As he stood waiting in the Gryffindor common room he found that he was actually nervous. He and Ginny had spent very little time apart in the last five months but now, with all the preparation and anticipation, he had butterflies as he waited for her to appear on the staircase. He was checking the shine on his shoes for the hundredth time when he heard,

“Hello, Harry.”

He looked up and his heart skipped a beat. She stood at the top of the last set of stairs leading from the girls dorm to the common room. Her long red hair was combed to fall over both shoulders and down both the front and back of her robes. The deep green of the gown made the perfect background for her hair and the whole formed the perfect frame for her face, which was radiant. The only thing Harry could bring himself to say was,

“Wow.”

“I assume you mean that as a compliment, Harry,” she said with a little smile.

“You sure can. Ginny, you look gorgeous.”

“Much better.”

Her smile went full and her eyes twinkled as she descended the last staircase. She came to a stop a few feet from Harry and gave him a thorough examination. She nodded her head and said,

“And you, Mr. Potter are looking very handsome tonight. Even your unruly hair seems to be cooperating a bit more this evening. Shall we go?”

Harry offered his arm to Ginny and they made it as far as the hole that led out of the Gryffindor common room and stopped. Harry laughed,

“Well, so much for a dignified exit. May I offer to assist you, Miss Weasley?”

“Why thank you, Mr. Potter. You are most gallant,” Ginny replied with a giggle.

Harry climbed out of the hole and then offered his hands to Ginny and helped her through. She stood up and checked herself and then reinspected Harry for any damage. Satisfied, she took his arm again and they proceeded down the several flights of stairs to the Great Hall. Many other students were likewise making their way looking or

trying to look their finest. Harry was convinced that Ginny was the most beautiful girl there but he had to admit he was a bit biased. When they entered the Hall they could see it was arranged in a similar manner to the TriWizards Tournament Banquet with many smaller round tables, a large central area cleared for dancing and a long table along the wall opposite the faculty dais, set for a buffet dinner. The long faculty table was gone and likewise smaller tables were set. Harry looked up and saw that Bill Weasley was there and so was Fleur. As always she looked absolutely breathtaking. Her long hair shimmered like brushed silver and you'd swear she positively glowed. When she saw Harry and Ginny come in she rose from her seat and swept down the stairs that led down from the side of the dais. She was working her magic and the boys that were already in the Hall stopped what ever they were doing or saying to watch her go by, resulting in a number of whacks from disgruntled dates. Harry could only smile.

"arry, Geenny, oh eet ees so good to see you again. I've missed you both so much."

She gave her sister-in-law a big hug and kisses on both cheeks. The she pulled Harry into her arms and held him tightly, kissed both his cheeks and then held his face in her hands and looked him in the eyes for a moment.

"And what of you, mon ami? 'ow do you fare, 'arry?" she said, her expression serious.

"I'm doing fine, Fleur. The most dangerous thing I've had to deal with is my own flying."

"arry, do not try and fool me," she said. "I know all about what 'appened to you that afternoon een the store. Now tell me again, 'ow are you."

Harry reached out again and pulled Fleur back into his embrace. He looked over at Ginny and gave her the 'why don't people believe me' look.

“Fleur, I’m fine. Yes, that was a bad day, but it’s over and I’ve come to grips with what caused it. I can give you all the details but not tonight. Tonight is for fun and good food and bad dancing.”

“Bad dancing, ‘arry? Oh no, not after all that work.”

Harry looked panicked and Fleur’s hand flew to her mouth. Ginny looked at both of them with narrowed eyes.

“What work? What have you been up to?” she demanded.

Before they could answer music began to play and Fleur said,

“Excuse me, my ‘usband awaits for our first dance.”

She hurried away to where she met Bill at the bottom of the stairs from the dais. Ginny turned her full attention on Harry.

“What did she mean, Harry? Out with it,” she insisted.

“Better to show you, my love. Would you care to dance?”

Before she could answer he took her hand and led her out onto the dance floor and began to lead her in a simple but elegant step that she found easy enough to follow. Ginny was very impressed. She remembered the dance at the Tournament Ball and Harry wasn’t all that good. She let herself be carried along and lost herself in the rhythm and movement. When the music died away and they swirled to a halt she looked up at Harry and said breathlessly,

“Oh, Harry, that was wonderful. Where did you learn to do that?”

“Well, you gave me the idea, Ginny. When you said that thing comparing dancing to how I flew during the first match I started to think about how I did it. I did it by visualizing what I wanted the broom to do as much as anything so I thought if I could get someone to show me how to dance, what moves to make, then I could try the visualization trick to practice and get good at it. I asked Bill if he and Fleur could help me.”

“So that’s what all that sneaky talking stuff was about a couple of weeks ago.”

“That’s right, Ginny. I spent that Sunday morning with them going through dances that Fleur knew and had taught Bill. Then at night Kreacher of all people would help. He can conjure up a pretty good image of you, more than a ghost but not really real and I practiced every night.”

“You went to all that trouble just for me?” she said quietly, her eyes wide.

“Of course. I told you I’d do anything for you and that means it’s no trouble. It was fun.”

“But if you saw Fleur so recently what was all that about you... well, you know.”

“Well she played it up a bit in the beginning but when she was asking me about how I was feeling, doesn’t matter how long it’s been since we’ve seen each other. She still thinks I’m on the verge of falling apart at any minute. It’s really kind of sweet but it does get to be a bit much after a while. Hey, another song. Let’s go.”

He took her in hand and they danced again to a livelier tune and when they were done they were both laughing and out of breath. Bill and Fleur had come to a stop near by and Ginny waved them over.

“So, I have you two to thank for Mr. Twinkletoes here, do I?” she asked with a big smile.

“We helped, Ginny, but Harry did most of it. He caught on very fast,” Bill said.

“Oui, Geenny, your ‘arry ees quite the natural dancer once ‘e sets ‘ees mind to eet. In fact, I believe he owes me a dance. ‘arry?” The last was as much command as it was a request.

“Ok, Fleur, it would be an honor.”

“Ginny, do you mind dancing with your big brother?” Bill asked.

“Oh, if I must,” she replied haughtily then giggled.

As with everything else Fleur did she danced with flair and elegance. She and Harry cut quite a swath across the dance floor and were being watched by just about everyone in the hall. The boys were envious of Harry for having such a beautiful partner and the girls were wishing that their partners could dance that well. It wasn't that Harry was doing anything difficult or fancy, they were really simple steps but he did them so well that they appeared more masterly. When they were done they got a smattering of applause and a few 'well done's. Harry got another big hug from Fleur and that was always a good thing. The hall was crowded now and the early dancers left the floor to make some room and grab a bite from the buffet table. Bill insisted that it was okay that Harry and Ginny join he and Fleur at their table on the dais and it afforded them a good view of the dance floor. Despite many stated misgivings it looked like mostly everyone was having a good time. He could see that Hermione even got Ron to show up and they were making a small circuit on the floor with Hermione coaching Ron through some steps.

As they worked their way through their meal Harry spied a familiar head of long black hair standing with some other first year girls watching the dancing. As could be expected all the first year boys were on the other side of the Hall acting like, well, eleven year old boys. Harry leaned over to Ginny and whispered in her ear,

“Excuse me, but I see another pretty girl that I would like to dance with.”

She looked startled and then followed his glance. Then she smiled and gave him a brief kiss and said,

“My hero.”

Harry smiled, then stood up and walked down off the dais and came to a halt next to Abigail.

“Excuse me, Miss Westwood. Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

Abigail looked up at Harry, obviously startled.

“But I don’t really know how to dance, Mr. Potter,” she replied although the look on her face said she really wanted to.

“Oh, I think we can take care of that. Please?”

She nodded and smiled very wide, the girls around her giggling and giggling. Harry took her by the hand and walked her out to the floor where a small space opened for them. Harry took her other hand and placed it on his upper arm. The he closed his eyes and whispered ‘Wingardium Leviosa’ and heard a gasp. When he looked, the top of Abigail’s head was a lot closer and her hand could now reach his shoulder. She was looking at him with wonder in her eyes and as he began to waltz her around, her feet a foot off the floor, she began to smile and laugh. When the music finally came to an end, for it did seem to have gone on longer then the usual songs, Abigail slowly floated to the floor.

“Thank you, Miss Westwood,” Harry said. “You’re a very fine dancer.”

“That was the best thing ever, Mr. Potter. Thank you very much.”

“Well, after all, what are big brothers for.”

She laughed again and ran over to her friends who all huddled together and began to chatter and giggle. Harry walked back to his table, all the time his eyes fixed on those of Ginny who had watched him the whole time. As he got near the table she stood up and pulled him into a fierce embrace. When she let go and stepped back she looked at him with shining eyes and gave her head a little shake.

“That was just beautiful, Harry.”

“Thank you, love.”

They sat down and Fleur pulled his head to her and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. Bill broke in,

“Harry, look.”

Harry turned and looked back at the dance floor just as a boy who looked to be a Hufflepuff second year shyly came up to Abigail and asked her to dance. When they started it was awkward, difficult and entirely enthralling to watch. Abigail appeared to be having every bit as much fun as when she danced with Harry. Hermione and Ron skirted around the little couple and came up to join the rest at the urgings of Bill.

Sitting back and watching all the students in the Hall, some dancing, some eating, most smiling and then back at his ‘family’ at the table Harry could finally admit that now, in this place, in this time, he was happy and that was enough.

Harry's Future, part 4

Harry stood behind the podium in the Great Hall looking out over an assemblage of most of the student body, a fair number of the faculty and a few visitors from the Ministry of Magic, including the now official Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt. It was Tuesday evening of the second week after Halloween. Bill Weasley had arranged for Harry to give a lecture to his older Defense Against the Dark Arts students. It was mandatory attendance for all fifth through seventh years, voluntary for lower grades and requests had been made for certain guests to be present. Harry could see all his first years there, as well as Ron and George Weasley, Angelina Johnson and several other already graduated members of the DA, including Neville Longbottom who had returned from his first field trip just last week. He was feeling more than a bit nervous but he could also see a certain redhead looking up at him with pride and love in her eyes so he took a deep breath and began.

"Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. For those of you who were required to be here, well, school can be difficult. For those of you here by choice, I hope you won't be too disappointed. As part of my assignment as assistant to Professor Weasley, I was asked to, well, provide some lectures on my experiences in dealing with the Dark Arts these past seven years. I know it's normal practice to hold questions until the end but I thought I might break the ice a bit by taking one question up front. Anyone want to be first?"

A number of hands shot up and Harry looked around and then saw a fifth year Slytherin girl with a very thoughtful expression tentatively raising her hand.

"Yes, Miss..?" he indicated with his hand.

"Middleton, sir. Um, I was wondering, what would you consider to be the best defense against the Dark Arts, I mean, it's what we call the course. Is there one?"

"Well, Miss Middleton, I don't know of one single charm or spell if that is what you mean, but there is one thing that would provide the most benefit I think. And that is...love."

Harry could see that the girl was surprised and he was getting some odd looks from the audience. Ginny's look was quizzical. Harry gave a lopsided grin.

"I know it's not the answer you might expect or want, but let me explain. I think we can all agree that Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, was just about as dark a wizard as you could expect to find. At his height there near the end he embodied pretty much everything we think of as dark. But who was he in the beginning? He was Tom Riddle, the son of a muggle father and a witch who had fallen in love with a muggle, who bewitched that muggle into believing he loved her and when he discovered what happened he abandoned them both, her to die brokenhearted, and Tom to be sent to an orphanage. What might have been the future if this boy had been raised by people who loved him and he could love in return? What if he had found within himself the power to love others despite his harsh situation? It's not unheard of."

Harry looked down and saw Ginny looking at him as if transfixed. He gazed around and made eye contact with Abigail who smiled and nodded.

"Let me tell you something and I get arguments about this but seeing that I'm up here giving the lecture, it means it's true," he smiled and got a laugh from the audience.

"Nothing I've ever done, no matter how spectacular or noteworthy, was done without the help of friends or family. Family and friendship is all based on love of one sort or another. My very survival is the result of love. The final defeat of Voldemort and his Death Eaters was the result of love. Love for and from family, friends and community. Children raised with love find little reason to stray to the dark side. Friends who truly care can usually keep you from taking that first fatal step. All those things that drive a witch or wizard to the Dark Arts looking for power, riches, or whatever they feel they need to put meaning in their lives have a difficult time getting a foothold in a soul that's full of love. So yes, that would be my answer. Now, having completely ruined your evening with all that sentimental fluff lets get to the things you really are interested in."

Before he could start however applause began. He could see Ginny, Hermione, Ron and his DA friends all standing and clapping. Abigail and many others likewise were cheering for Harry and soon the entire Hall rang with the sound. Harry did his best to stop them but it wasn't working. He looked helplessly down at Bill who just shrugged as he himself was applauding. But he took pity on his assistant and he took out his wand and shot some sparks into the air and called out for the audience to settle down. When the Hall was once again quiet, Harry coughed and began again.

"Thank you very much. So, what practical aspects would I consider best? I would say that a strong grounding in the fundamental aspects of magic. Charms and wand work are very important when confronted by a dark witch or wizard. It really is amazing just how effective a well chosen, well placed charm can be when it is used quickly and effectively. So I would strongly recommend that you concentrate very hard on making sure that you have command of the basics of magic and find ways to safely practice them until it becomes instinctive."

Harry noticed Neville trying to attract his attention.

"Yes, Neville?"

"Umm, I know this is your lecture Harry but I just thought I'd mention something you might not."

"And that would be?"

"Well," Neville turned more towards the audience, "when we had our first DA meeting or class you might call it we were all kind of expecting Harry to reveal some really, I don't know, I'd guess you'd say cool secrets that had helped him with all his encounters with Voldemort. What he started off with was Expelliarmus, a basic disarming charm. Today, I don't think there is a DA member who can't do that spell in his or her sleep. But it was the perfect start. We all got really good at something so basic and by the time Harry had to leave a lot of us were up to doing the Patronus charm. I think we're proof that what Harry's saying is right. That's all."

“Thanks, Neville. You’re right, I wasn’t going to mention that,” Harry laughed.

The rest of the lecture went well. Harry laid out how various encounters had developed, what had been done and what the results had been. He never failed to give credit to those that had helped either in preparation or during the actual event. He also made sure that he talked about the consequences. He didn’t want anyone to confuse the fact that just because he didn’t look like Mad Eyed Moody that there wasn’t pain and injury associated with what he had been through. This wasn’t because he was looking for sympathy or to make his actions more heroic, but as a caution to anyone who might think to romanticize what he and others had been through. Throughout the entire presentation he repeatedly came back to the theme of teamwork and preparation. If the number of thoughtful expressions and head nods were any indication then Harry appeared to have made a good impression on many of the students and nearly all the adults in attendance.

“Well, that’s pretty much all I have for tonight. Are there any questions?”

There were many and Harry did his best to answer them as honestly as he could.

After an hour, Bill Weasley had to call a halt as it was getting late.

“First of all, I’d like to thank Mr. Potter for his efforts this evening. As I’ve mentioned on more than one occasion his depth of experience is fairly unique and unheard of for one so young. Yes, Minister?”

Kingsley Shacklebolt stood up and his deep voice carried through the Hall.

“If I may, Professor Weasley, I would like to add my thanks to yours and I’m sure the rest of us here tonight for Harry taking the time to discuss his experiences with us. I can imagine some of the things he discussed with us were not easy for him to dwell on. And I think he has the right of it saying that friendship, family and a sense of community are so important in defending what is good in the

wizarding world from the Dark Arts. I can tell you that based on what we've learned from our investigations in to the whole dire business of Voldemort is that if he didn't have the dividing line between so called 'pure bloods' and 'muggle borns' he never would have been able to sway so many to his cause. I suggest that we take what young Mr. Potter has to say to heart. It may just be what saves us from a next time. Thank you, Professor."

"No. Thank you, Minister. I think we've been fortunate to hear some true wisdom tonight. Well, I think that's it for tonight, ladies and gentlemen. Class dismissed," he finished with a smile.

There was another, although shorter, round of applause and the crowd began to stream out of the Hall. A group of people gathered at the bottom of the stairs leading down from the dais. They offered Harry handshakes and congratulations and few special hugs from Ginny and Hermione and Angelina. Bill was looking especially pleased.

"Well, Harry, I think that went exceedingly well. You'd better be careful. Once Professor McGonagall hears about tonight she may have you chained so you can't escape her."

"I dunno, Bill, I mean Professor. I think we've an arrangement worked out," Harry said with a smile.

"Harry, I'm so proud of you. To hear you talk about all those hair raising situations so calmly. I had shivers and goose bumps half the time. You should write a book about your adventures."

"Well, I don't know about that, Ginny, who'd want to read about an orphan wizard at school," he said with a laugh.

Every one around him raised their hands, then laughed.

The period from Halloween to Christmas break was busy for Harry with his studies, teaching and Quidditch practice. He, Hermione and Ginny had found a good rhythm and were making the best of their

time. Harry's confidence in his magic skills was increasing exponentially as he and Professor Flitwick worked on his control and visualization techniques. His command of his power was becoming such that he could levitate the most fragile of objects one moment and lift heavy stone blocks the next. Quidditch practice continued although Gryffindor wasn't scheduled for another match until after the holiday break was over. Ron and George were doing quite well at both stores and there was even some talk that by next year they would outstrip Zonko's in sales. Contracts had been signed with the owners of the two shops in Diagon Alley that made Harry a silent partner with a quarter stake in the businesses. As before, his share of the profits would go into the Ministry fund. A message from Gringotts just after Halloween informed Harry that the Ministry had made an inquiry into the source of the additional funds that were showing up in the account. When it became obvious to them that Gringotts was not going to reveal the source, the Ministry asked that the 'source' be informed that the Ministry was extremely grateful and that the additional monies were a very great help. Harry was all in all a very happy young man. Ginny made mention of this fact one night in the Gryffindor common room after they had finished a study session. Harry and Ginny were snuggled up together in one of the overstuffed chairs. Hermione was in the next chair, jotting down some notes on a piece of parchment.

"Yeah, Ginny, I guess I can't help myself. Life is about as perfect as it can be for me right now. You're the biggest part of it, but all the school stuff is working so well too. I've got no reason to be anything but happy. I hope it lasts a very long time."

But it wasn't going to, not entirely. The Holiday break arrived right on time and Ginny, Harry, and Hermione were all heading home. There would be no holiday trip for Hermione and her family this year since they were still recovering from the year in Australia and needed to be a bit more frugal this year. Harry had been half tempted to offer his help but he stopped himself, knowing that you could be too generous. It worked out well as the Grangers were invited, and accepted, to spend Christmas day at the Burrow. It would be crowded but a lot of fun they all said.

The ride on the express was back to normal with the three friends sharing a compartment in one of the forward cars and having a relaxed trip chatting and playing cards. Hermione knew all about Gin Rummy and was giving Ginny a run for her money and poor Harry was getting drubbed mercilessly. About half way to London, someone knocked on their door. It was the Slytherin fifth year, Miss Middleton. Harry waved her in.

"Hello. Miss Middleton, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Maddie Middleton. Can I speak to you for a moment, sir?"

"Sure, please, sit down."

The girl sat down, looking uncomfortable but resolute. She looked at the three Gryffindors and then began speaking.

"I've been thinking about what you said at the lecture in the Great Hall when you answered my question. I've been in Slytherin house for five years, sir. I heard a lot of things said about you and Gryffindor house. I didn't always believe it but I kept it to myself. I guess I was afraid of what might happen if I said anything. You know not everyone in Slytherin is like those...well, you know, the ones who were in the Inquisitorial Squad and the Death Eater types but we were all so afraid, you know."

Harry simply nodded. The girl took a breath and went on.

"I guess we can't all be brave like you all are. Isn't that what the hat says about Gryffindors, brave? Anyway, there's been a rumor floating around the Slytherins about you. Apparently there are still some supporters on the loose and there's been talk about getting back at you for what you did. One version of the rumor is they want revenge; another is that someone might be trying to set himself up as the next big dark wizard, although no one knows who that might be. I don't think Professor Slughorn has caught on to it yet, or he would have told you. He's been giving little talks about cleaning up Slytherin's reputation, that sorta thing. But after what you said that time, I just kept thinking and thinking. It's not right and it's got to stop. Most of us agree although there are a couple of people who still say things about

you but I think they are just jealous and figure your going to get Gryffindor the Quidditch and House cups this year. Anyway, I thought you should know and I wanted to tell you to be careful,” she finished saying with her head bowed and her hands clasped in front of her.

Ginny and Hermione were looking very upset, but Harry was calm. He reached over and took hold of Maddie’s hands and spoke quietly to her.

“Thank you, Maddie. It was very brave of you to come to me like this. I can promise you that I’ll be careful and I have very good friends, you included now, who will help me.”

“You’re welcome, sir. I think I should get back to my own compartment now.”

As she stood up, Harry stood as well. Ginny and Hermione got up and gave Maddie brief hugs and words of thanks. After she left they sat back down again and Ginny exploded.

“I can’t believe this. Those idiots out there can’t get it through their thick skulls that they lost and its over,” she practically yelled.

“Calm down, Ginny,” Harry said quietly. “Haven’t we been saying that there will always be those that will take up or continue to use the Dark Arts? At least this way we know they are out there and we can be ready.”

“Yes, Harry, but you’d think that they’d at least wait a while to rebuild or whatever,” Hermione suggested.

“We don’t even know if it’s any of his old crew. For all we know it could be someone just talking big or looking to make a name for themselves. It might be like in those American western movies where the cowboy goes after the famous gunfighter to make a reputation for himself.”

Hermione nodded, but Ginny didn’t have a clue and her two friends spent the next half hour explaining. When the train pulled into King’s Cross the three of them got off the train and were met by Mr. and Mrs.

Weasley. They didn't have to worry about baggage and they made for the exit to the mundane world. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were waiting just opposite the wall between platforms nine and ten. There were hugs all around and before they went their separate ways reaffirmation of the invitation and acceptance for Christmas day was made. Once again a Ministry car was made available and the ride home was pleasant and uneventful.

Safely home Ginny prodded Harry to reveal what they had learned from Maddie Middleton. When her parents noticed the quiet but emphatic exchange Harry had no choice.

"A fifth year Slytherin told us on the train home that there are some rumors floating around her house that someone is out to get me. Either out of revenge or as a way to establish themselves as the next big dark wizard."

Molly Weasley looked concerned and angry. Arthur looked thoughtful. He nodded then said,

"Well, Harry, I understand the Magical Law Enforcement office of the Ministry has been picking up some talk of that kind although it was never tied to you directly. Just that there was something up, so to speak. This might be useful information and I'll pass it on. Of course we'll keep an eye on things here while you're with us. But I wouldn't get too worked up about it. They'd have to mount something pretty major with all the wizarding might we could muster here. They'd have to be crazy, really, especially after what your mum did to that Bellatrix Lestranger."

Harry saw the look that crossed his adopted mother's face at the mention of her killing the twisted witch in the final battle at Hogwarts. Harry had completely forgotten about that. He gave her a smile and took hold of one of her hands.

"I'm a lucky guy to have had such protective mothers."

Mrs. Weasley still looked far from happy. With only a few days until Christmas, she didn't need this kind of distraction and worry. The first night passed quietly. Harry, Ginny and Ron were home. George was

due to arrive the next day. Percy was now living in a small apartment in London and would come for Christmas Eve and day. The day before Christmas Eve a number of packages were delivered to Harry from several shops in Diagon Alley. He took them up to his room and said everyone would just have to wait until Christmas to find out what they were. Everyone pitched in to get the house as spotless and orderly as possible. All the while everyone was keeping an eye on one another and the grounds around the house. No one expected any trouble during the day but they were still a bit apprehensive.

It was close to midnight when Harry awoke to the gentle prodding by Kreacher.

“Kreacher? What is it?”

“Master Harry must awake. The garden gnomes are most agitated. They say that someone is out behind the garden wall. More than one. Should Kreacher wake the house?”

“Not yet. Let me go see. Where is my Invisibility Cloak?”

“In Master Harry’s closet.”

Harry got up as quietly as he could and slipped on his pants and shirt, grabbed his jacket and his cloak from the closet and slipped out of the room and down the stairs. He slipped on his shoes, then wrapped himself in the Invisibility Cloak.

“Kreacher, did the gnomes tell you where these guys are?”

“They are behind the stone wall nearest to where the old shed is.”

“Ok, I’m going to go out the front door. They won’t see me from there, and then I’ll go into the back yard. Can you get up on the roof without being seen and let me know if anyone else shows up?”

“Kreacher can do that, Master Harry.”

“Good, let’s go.”

Harry went out the door first followed by Kreacher. The little elf went to the left and Harry to the right. As he moved into the backyard he could sense that indeed something was amiss. The garden gnomes were very agitated. Their hiding spots in the hedges were evident from the shaking leaves and branches. It was a cold night and Harry could see steaming breath rising from behind the far section of garden wall. It looked like there might be three but before he roused the house he wanted to make sure. Slowly he moved forward, placing each step carefully so as not to make noise on the frosty grass. He was glad there was no snow to crunch through. He was perhaps a dozen yards from the wall when he was able to pick up voices.

“So tell me again why this is such a smart idea, Alf.”

“It’s simple, Sid. We ‘ide out ‘ere until midnight. Then we throw some spells and such at the ‘ouse. Then Bennie let’s loose with that Morsmorde spell ‘e learned from that Death Eater before it all went south on em all. Then if any of em come out we take down the first few then we Disapparate out of ‘ere. Everyone thinks it’s the Death Eaters come back for revenge on that Potter kid. The Ministry puts all kinds of people out here to guard the place and we have the pick of places to knock over for the next few days. Piece o’ cake. That’s why we started spreading them rumors so’s everyone would take it serious like.”

Harry couldn’t believe what he was hearing. All this worrying about a few house breakers looking to cause an uproar to cover for some petty thieving. His friends and family worrying for the last two days over something this stupid and petty. Suffice to say Harry was angry. It was more accurate to say he was enraged. He let the cloak fall to the ground and he stood up straight and pointed his wand at the wall just to the left of where he thought the three bandit wizards crouched. To call them dark wizards would have been too much of a compliment.

“CONFRINGO!” he bellowed.

A section of wall about three feet wide was blasted out into the field beyond the yard. The three would be burglars were thrown sideways into each other and stunned. Harry rushed through the gap and

turned on them with his wand ready. As the three scruffy looking wizards began to untangle themselves he pointed his wand at them and said more calmly,

“Petrificus Totalus.”

The three men went rigid, only their eyes, wide in panic, could move. He could hear a commotion begin in the house. He was shivering, not from the cold, but from a fire burning inside him. He had never been so angry before.

“Lumos,” he said and the tip of his wand blazed bathing the criminals in bright white light.

“Do you know who I am?” he said.

One of the petrified wizards shifted his eyes back and forth to indicate a negative.

“Does this help?”

He held his blazing wand over his head to illuminate the clearly visible patch of forehead that held the famous scar. All three sets of eyes went as wide as they could go.

“That’s right. Do you idiots have any idea the anxiety and worry you’ve caused my family and friends with this stupid stunt? I should burn you three right down to the ground for that.”

The three men were clearly in a state of panic. Their bodies were literally vibrating as their fear waged war with the binding effects of the spell.

“But I won’t do that. When the Ministry finds out that at least one of you has had contact with a Death Eater they’ll have lots of questions for you and maybe a nice dark spot in Azkaban when they’re done. I think you fellas are in for a very bad Christmas.”

He could hear the back door slam open and Mr. Weasley, George and Ron hurrying out into the yard, their wands at the ready.

“Harry, what was that? Are you alright? What’s going on?” Mr. Weasley fired the questions at him in rapid order.

“I’m ok, and I have our so called threat over here. We’ll need someone from the Ministry to collect them.”

As the three Weasley men joined Harry outside the wall Mrs. Weasley called out.

“Arthur, what is it, is Harry alright?”

“Yes, Molly, everything is under control. We need to get a message to the Ministry though.”

At that moment Kreacher popped into view on top of the wall.

“Does Master Harry require anything of Kreacher?”

“Yes, can you go to the Ministry of Magic and tell them we need someone here to pick up some criminals?”

“It is done,” was all the elf responded and he popped out of sight.

“What’s this all about, Harry and why were you out here alone?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“Kreacher woke me up and told me that the garden gnomes were acting nervous and that they thought someone bad was outside the wall. And no I don’t know how he was able to talk to them. Kreacher and I came out the front way. I had on my Invisibility Cloak and I had Kreacher go up on the roof to look for anyone else. I snuck up to about ten yards or so and I could hear them talking. They’re just a few common burglars. They thought if they made a big scene out here it would draw most of the Ministry’s magical law enforcement department out here and they’d be free to break into houses or shops or something they had planned. One of them knows how to conjure up the Dark Mark and they thought that plus if they could curse a few of us as we came outside would keep the Ministry busy for a while. They were the ones that started the rumors, too, or so they said.”

“Why the hole in my wall, Harry?”

“Um, well, sir, I was trying to distract them so I could bind them somehow. I was pretty mad when I heard what they were planning and why. Guess I just lost my temper. I’ll fix it in the morning.”

“We’ll all fix it in the morning, Harry. That’s what family does. Just like we should have all been here to deal with this. Don’t argue with me, young man. You are not an Auror yet and your days of free lancing are over. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, feeling abashed.

A rapid succession of pops announced the arrival of a half dozen Aurors and Kreacher.

“Hello, Arthur. What’s all this then? This house elf told us Harry Potter was in danger or some such.”

“He may have been, Maxwell, but it looks like he’s got it in hand. Apparently these three are common housebreakers who were looking to create a diversion by putting up the Dark Mark and then cursing whoever they could as we came out of the house.”

“The Dark Mark? Which one knows that accursed spell?”

“Whichever one is called Bennie,” Harry answered.

Two of the three rigid perpetrators looked sideways at the third whose eyes were flying back and forth in denial.

“Yes well, all right gentlemen, let’s get these three in hand and back to the Ministry. We’re interested especially in anyone who claims they can conjure the Dark Mark.”

With that two Aurors lifted up each of the three paralyzed wizards and held them up between them. Maxwell looked at Harry.

"We'll need a statement from you, Mr. Potter. If you could write out a description of what occurred and send it by owl we'd appreciate it. Someone may come out after the holidays to talk to you."

The Auror smiled at Harry.

"Word is you're looking to join up. If this is a sample of your work, we'll be glad to have you on board. See you after the holiday, Arthur."

With that each pair of Aurors popped out with their miscreant in hand.

"Alright, everyone inside," Mr. Weasley was still visibly upset.

On the way in Harry stopped and picked up his cloak. For a second he seriously considered slipping it on and going off and hiding somewhere but that would only make matters worse, so he trudged inside to face the music. It was very loud music, discordant, moderately incoherent with plenty of sharp and flat notes thrown in.

Mr. Weasley couldn't believe that someone as smart as Harry would be so foolish to venture out alone like that. Mrs. Weasley had been scared out of her wits and thought all manner of things when she was startled out of her bed when Harry blasted the wall. Ginny hadn't said a word; her fury was silent and all the more worrisome. George and Ron were upset because Harry didn't ask them to go along. Harry stood in silence while his family raged around him. When they finally realized he wasn't going to argue back they began to settle down.

"Don't you have anything to say, Harry," demanded Mrs. Weasley.

"Yes, but I thought you deserved the chance to talk first."

He took a deep breath.

"You're right to be upset. I probably shouldn't have gone out there by myself but I thought that until we knew what was out there it would be better if I went alone and not risk losing another member of the family. And if it turned out to be nothing then I wouldn't have gotten everyone upset without a reason," he said quietly.

His quiet acceptance of their chastisement took much of the heat out of their collective anger. Ginny took this moment to have her say. She walked up to Harry and took his face firmly in her two hands and tilted his head down to look him square in the eye.

“You are done, now and forever, with solo heroics. You are part of a family of very capable witches and wizards, Harry. You’re the one who made such a point at your lecture in the Great Hall about teamwork and all the help you received doing the things you’ve done and then you go and do this. No more, my love. Do you understand me? No more.”

Then she pulled his head down and gave him a brief, warm kiss. Harry realized at that moment that this beautiful young witch was determined to go through life as his full partner. His mind flashed on the image of Ginny going with him on his assignments as an Auror. He quickly forgot that thought.

“I think I got the message,” he said looking around as much as Ginny’s grip on his face allowed.

“It’s time to practice what I preach and remember that I have others to count on and to be considerate of.” He gave Ginny a rueful smile. “This family stuff takes some getting used to, doesn’t it?”

She smiled back at him and slapped him lightly on both cheeks.

“Yes, my dear, it does, and it looks like you need lots and lots of practice.”

“Alright, family.” Mr. Weasley broke in. “Let’s all try and get back to sleep, we have a wall to repair in the morning.”

To a chorus of ‘yes, sir’s, the Weasley family went back to bed. George made a detour to Harry and Ron’s room.

“Alright, Harry, out with it. What the heck did you do to that wall? Even in the little bit of moonlight I could see stones from the wall way out into the field.”

"I guess I lost my temper and that meant I lost control and just put everything I had into the 'Confringo' spell. Professor Flitwick'll be really disappointed. But what they had planned was so petty and they were going to us the Dark Mark and hurt as many of us as they could."

"I appreciate your reaction, mate, but if you want to be an Auror, you better control your temper. They test you for that sort of thing you know," Ron said.

"I know, Ron, and I hardly ever lose my temper. You've been around me long enough to know that. I guess I just never had something so important to me threatened like that," Harry said.

"Come on, Harry," George cut in. "Voldemort threatened to wipe out half the wizarding world. That wasn't important to you?"

"Well, I guess it was a different kind of important. Besides, in those situations I was always too scared to get angry."

George's snort indicated just what he thought about the idea of Harry being scared. Shortly afterward George went to his room and left Harry and Ron to try and get to sleep. It wasn't a particularly long sleep as Mr. Weasley had the boys up at seven thirty for breakfast and then out into the yard to begin the wall repairs. Harry, Ron and George had the job to scour the field and levitate the stones back to the wall where Mr. Weasley worked with some sort of mortar mix he whipped up in his shed. It took them all morning but by the time Mrs. Weasley called them in for lunch they were done.

"Well, boys, a solid job if I may say so. I may have to do some touch ups come spring but we're done for now."

"Umm, I was just wondering, Mr. Weasley. Isn't it too cold for that mortar to work? Won't it just freeze up?" Harry asked.

"Ah, well, Harry, if this was ordinary muggle mortar then yes, it would. However, this is a very special formula handed down by Scandinavian wizards who couldn't afford to wait for winter to end to make repairs to their stone towers. It came to England when the

Vikings first invaded. So, let's get in for lunch and see if your mum needs any help for tomorrow."

So they had their lunch and yes, Molly did need plenty of help, doing the last of the cleaning and hanging decorations. There were plenty of evergreen garland, mistletoe and holly berries. To that were added gold stars and crescent moons and a Christmas tree that had been cut from the nearby woods and floated to the house. Around mid afternoon Charlie arrived and Percy wasn't far behind. Bill and Fleur made it just before dinner was to be served. The atmosphere was taking on a festive air although Harry did have a bit of a rough patch when Bill and Fleur heard about Harry's adventure the night before.

"Harry," Bill said a bit reproachfully, shaking his head. "As your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher I'm afraid I'd have to fail you on this if it was a practical exam. Going out there, out numbered and not knowing your adversary's strength was a foolish thing to do."

"Sorry, Bill," was all Harry could think to say.

Fleur was standing next to her husband and her face was like a mask set in stone. She stepped forward and looked at Harry. Looking at him the way she did Harry was reminded of the actual veela that had been at the Quidditch World Cup and how they looked when they were angry. He could see a touch of it in her eyes.

"Harry, mon ami. I love you like the brother I never 'ad. I understand your desire to protect your, our, family. But I say thees to you 'ere and now, that eef you ever do somesing theese stoopeed again I will feenish what the Dark ones 'ave tried to do by strangling you weeth my bare 'ands. Do you understand me, mon frere?" she said, her voice practically vibrating with anger.

Harry stepped forward and pulled her toward him. He held her tightly and whispered something in her ear. She pulled her head back to look at him and said,

"Oui, yes, you 'ad better be, dear boy. Now, we shall speak of theese no further and 'ave a 'appy 'oliday, yes?"

Then she kissed his cheeks and his forehead and then smiled at him warmly. Ron was looking at his friend and he couldn't help but laugh. Harry looked at him, one arm still around Fleur.

"What's so funny, mate?"

"Oh, it was just a thought, Harry. Do you remember the trouble we had coming up with dates for the TriWizards Tournament Ball and how that turned out, then the way things turned out with Cho Chang?"

"Yeah, what's your point?" Harry said suspiciously.

"Well, look at you now. You and Ginny are madly in love, you spend almost as much time hugging Fleur as Bill does, then there's Gabrielle, that Abigail girl that Hermione told me about and then that girl on the train. Your Harry the Heart throb now," Ron said laughing.

Before he could move Ron took a hard shot from a pillow wielded by Ginny that almost knocked him over. Fleur added a second shot and Ron was forced to flee to safe haven.

Presents had been placed under the tree and there was a fair pile. The fortunes of the Weasleys as individuals and a family had improved substantially and it looked like it was going to be a very good Christmas. Dinner was a large ham, roasted potatoes, a variety of vegetables, warm rolls and a pudding for dessert. They sat in the smallish parlor, with the fireplace roaring. Ginny was perched on Harry's lap, as was Fleur on Bill's, the rest were tightly packed in on chairs and the couch. A toast was made in honor of the one who was not there, Fred. Mr. Weasley offered it in a strong voice, but sad. They spent some time recalling Fred at his worst and best. Depending on who was telling the tale, the worst and best were sometimes applied to the same episode. But each remembrance was done with fondness. It was approaching midnight when Mrs. Weasley suggested that they get to bed for tomorrow was going to be busy and that guests were due. Bill was going to bunk with George, Percy had his room and Fleur would sleep with Ginny. Nothing more was said of Harry's adventure of the previous evening.

Christmas dawned bright and cold. But the Burrow was a place of light and warmth. Breakfast was more or less a buffet affair as Hermione and her parents had arrived just in time. Plates were filled and any place to sit down was occupied. Harry was looking forward to the exchange of presents. Not because he was looking to get some particular gift, but instead to be able to give significant gifts for the first time in his life. He had given a fair amount of thought to what he would give to each of his family and friends. His poor owl had spent plenty of time on the wing between shops in Diagon Alley, Gringotts and Hogwarts. When everyone had finished with breakfast Mrs. Weasley shooed them all into the parlor.

“Now, where should we begin? There are so many of us and so many presents,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Um, may I begin?” Harry asked.

“Of course, Harry, dear. Go right ahead.”

“First of all, I’d like to say these are intended to say thanks to all of you who have in one way or another gotten me to where I am today, alive, healthy and happy, and after the other night’s adventures, wiser,” he said with a little grimace.

“I’ll start with Ginny. She dropped a lot of hints that I shouldn’t get her anything too fancy or expensive after the broom, but I figured what the heck. So here you are, my love. Thank you for so much happiness,” he said as he handed her a sizable package.

She took it from him with a quizzical look and then she tore into the wrapping. What she found was a deluxe care and accessory set for her Nimbus 2001 from the Quidditch Supply store. It contained everything to care for her broom, a new streamlined foot rest, a pair of goggles and a booklet on tips and tricks to get maximum performance from her broom. She was ecstatic and gave Harry a big hug and kiss.

“Now for my two best friends. It would take all day to list all the things I have to thank you guys for so I’ll just say, thanks for being there

when I needed you, which was pretty much always. Ron, here's yours, and Hermione."

Ron unwrapped a beautiful Wizards' Chess set. The board was made of maple and walnut. The pieces were hand cast pewter with enamel accents. The Wizard kings were at least three inches tall. Hermione was speechless. Harry had found for her a rare first edition History of Hogwarts that included several pages of handwritten commentary by the author. Ron put the set down and shook Harry's hand with both of his. Hermione couldn't find any words and just hung on to Harry and squeezed him till he thought he'd stop breathing. For George it was a bound collection of comedy sketches that only a Wizard produced book could do justice to since the comedians spoke and moved on the pages.

"Thanks, Harry, this is great. All my favorites are in here," George said gleefully.

Harry handed George a scroll, "This is for Fred, George."

George had a strange look on his face as he unrolled the scroll and read it. He then handed it Mr. Weasley, who read it and then looked at Harry.

"Thank you, Harry, this is wonderful," Mr. Weasley then looked at the others. "It's a scholarship for a muggle born wizard that provides for all their books and supplies for a full seven years in Fred's name. That's a wonderful remembrance, Harry."

"Percy, this is for you, I'm sure you'll put it to good use."

It was a complete set of desk accessories in leather and rosewood. As Percy looked at each item his eyes lit up.

"Wow, Harry, this is terrific. I've always wanted one of these but...well, wow. Thanks."

Bill received a three volume set that contained every known Dark Art curse, counter curse, potion and creature. Bill was thrilled.

“This is brilliant, Harry. I’ve heard about this set but I’ve never actually seen it.”

“I thought it would be a real asset for the advanced classes, Bill. As for finding it, Flourish and Blotts has some pretty extensive contacts and it’s amazing the kinds of things Gringotts is willing to help me with.”

“Fleur was a bit of a challenge. To be honest, I don’t really know all that much about her and the things that she likes but I thought this would be something special.”

He stood up and went to the front door and opened it.

“Merry Christmas, Fleur,” Harry said as three people walked into the house. It was Fleur’s mother, father and her sister, Gabrielle. Fleur squealed and bolted from her chair and threw her arms around her mother and father. Gabrielle was hugging the three of them all the while casting glances at Harry and giggling. Ginny looked over at Hermione and rolled her eyes and shook her head. Fleur pulled away from her family long enough to pull Harry into a one armed embrace and kissed his face with vigor.

“Thank you, ‘arry. Thees ees the best present I could ‘ave ‘oped for.”

Harry could only manage a smile in return, since she was close to strangling him with her arm around his neck. It was a few minutes before the Delacours untangled themselves and Harry was able to come back up for air. The younger celebrants wound up on the floor on pillows to make room for the new arrivals.

“Let’s see,” Harry continued. “Charlie, you took a bit of figuring but I think I came up with something that’s perfect for you.”

He handed Charlie a small package that proved to be a simple cardboard box. Charlie looked at Harry with a cocked eyebrow and then he opened the box and his jaw dropped and his eyes bugged out. He looked at Harry and said,

“Harry, are you kidding me? This has to be a joke.”

“Nope, it’s for real, Charlie.”

“What is it, Charlie? Out with it,” Mr. Weasley chided.

“It’s a certificate for the first production Firebolt II. Harry, this is too much, I mean it was one thing to buy a broom for Ginny, I mean she’s your....well, this is ridiculous.”

“Charlie, relax. First of all, it didn’t cost me a thing, except maybe a favor or two. Since they started advertising the Firebolt II with my endorsement they’ve been booking all kinds of orders. Practically every pro team in England has ordered them, plus a number of national teams. And since they went public with the donations to the Ministry relief fund they’ve been selling loads of the Nimbus models. They were more than happy to do this, Charlie. The only thing is they may ask you to offer an endorsement for their advertisements. Apparently your name is still well known in the Quidditch world,”

Harry said the last with a wry grin.

“Harry, I don’t know what to say, this is just incredible. Thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome, Charlie. I still remember how much help you were with Norbert,” Harry laughed.

“Mr. and Mrs. Granger, this is something I had made up for you. I’d suggest you keep it under wraps since any non wizarding folk who see it might not understand.”

Hermione’s parents looked at Harry in confusion. The took the package and Mrs. Granger said,

“Thank you, Harry, but you shouldn’t have done this. Helping Hermione bring us back home was more than enough. What are you thanking us for?”

“That should be obvious, ma’am. For giving us Hermione,” he said with a smile.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger smiled back at Harry and then they opened the package. It was a photo album similar to the one Hagrid gave Harry at the end of his first year. It contained a number of photos of Hermione with various friends from Hogwarts. They were typical wizard photos and the people in them were looking back out at the Grangers and waving or mugging and generally having a good time.

"Oh, Harry, this is just wonderful. We'll cherish this always," Mrs. Granger gushed. Hermione smiled at Harry misty eyed.

"And this brings me to you, Mum and Dad," Harry said.

"You can't give me anything better than what you just said, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said quietly.

"I'll try. It's my hope that as the years go by that there'll be a number of grandchildren for you both. As today proves, this house can get a bit tight when everyone is here and if we bring grandkids into the picture it's going to be like a sardine tin."

"Yes, Harry, we know the Burrow tends to be a bit snug, but what are you going on about?"

"Your present is this. On the first of March, a crew from the Marvel Wizard Home Remodeling company will be here to begin renovating and expanding the Burrow to include guest rooms, a bigger kitchen and enlarging the parlor. They'll take down the old shed and put up something with more room and equipment."

Harry's 'parents' looked at him in astonishment. The Weasley children were looking back and forth between Harry and their folks. They couldn't remember a time when their mum was at a loss for words. But she was the first to recover.

"Harry, dear, this is much too extravagant. We couldn't possibly..." she began but Harry cut her off.

"You could, you can, and you will. None of this is about giving flashy presents or showing off. You've each given me something that not to

long ago I didn't think I'd ever have, family and friends. So I just tried to find something for each of you that fit somehow with what you've given to me."

The room was silent for a few moments, broken only by the occasional sniff from one of the ladies. It was Mr. Weasley who broke the silence.

"Well, son, I can't, and won't, argue with that. We were very fortunate the day you stumbled across the boys at King's Cross. I say, a bigger, better workshop...I wonder if I could find another Anglia."

"Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley snapped.

This broke the tension and for a few minutes Harry was exchanging hugs and hand shakes all around. Other gifts were then handed out. Some of the highlights included Mrs. Weasley's baked goods, a variety of Weasleys Wizard Wheezes, clothes and from Gabrielle to Harry, a mounted print of the Rita Skeeter article on Harry that had been reprinted in French from their local wizard weekly. Around the edges were the signatures of a number of Gabi's classmates, apparently all of them girls. Harry smiled and thanked Gabi saying,

"Wow, this is really great, Gabi. Um, are all the people who signed it friends of yours?"

Gabi's english wasn't very good and she looked to Fleur for a translation. She nodded vigorously with a wide smile and spoke quickly to her big sister. About half way through he heard his name and Fleur looked startled. She said something and Gabi again nodded vigorously and his name was said again plus a lot he didn't understand. When Fleur turned toward Harry she was smiling but it looked pained. Softly she said,

"Just keeping smileeng, 'arry. No matter what I say, just keep smileeng."

"What?" Harry managed through a grin.

"Gabi said that all those names belong to the members of the Beauxbaton 'arry Potter fan club. Gabi ees the president."

Harry's face froze and his grin looked almost maniacal. In a choked voice he squeezed out past his clenched teeth,

"You've got to be kidding."

"No, 'arry, but pleeze do not get upset. I know 'ow you feel about such theengs but eef Gabi thinks you are un'appy with 'er eet will break 'er 'eart."

Harry fought down the panic and managed to unfreeze his face and get a real smile back on it. He looked at Gabi who was trying to understand what was going on between Harry and Fleur.

"Please tell her that I am very honored and flattered that she and her friends would go to all this trouble just for me."

Fleur began to speak quickly and by the time she was done Gabi's smile was almost ear to ear. She ripped off another barrage of French which Fleur translated.

"She sez that you are more than welcome. That eet all started soon after she returned 'ome after the TriWeezards Tournament. She was telling anyone 'oo would leesten about you and 'ow you risked losing to make sure she was safe. Then when the article that 'orrible Skeeter woman wrote telling your true story was translated and appeared een the Weezard Weekly of France they decided to form the club."

"Wow, that's really something."

Gabi added something, blushing to the roots of her silvery hair.

"She wonders, 'arry, eef you would be so kind as to 'ave your picture taken weeth 'er?"

The pleading look on Fleur's face which her sister couldn't see made it impossible to refuse so Harry nodded and Gabi jumped up and

began talking like a machine gun to her father. Mr. Delacour gave Harry a 'we don't speak the same language but I know what you're going through' smile and dug a camera out of his overcoat pocket that was hanging on the wall. Harry posed for three pictures in fact.

One was with Gabi alone, his arm around her shoulder. She looked like she couldn't decide if she should become hysterical or faint so she settled for freezing in place which made for a much better picture. The next was with Harry sandwiched between the two silver haired beauties. It was all he could do to keep his smile in place because behind the camera Ron was mugging for all he was worth until Hermione gave him a sharp elbow to the midsection that nearly doubled him over. Harry's smile became a bit wider and a good deal more authentic at that point. Then it was Harry with the whole Delacour family. Gabi was absolutely giddy until Harry gave her a big hug and had Fleur translate for him that he was glad he could make his new little sister so happy. At that point she slumped in his arms and they had to sit her on the couch and get her a drink to revive her.

As Harry sat himself down next to Ginny who was giving him a wry smile and shaking her head, Hermione leaned across and said,

"Harry, I was wondering what you got for your godson, Teddy."

"Well he's only a year or so old, so I figured toys or anything like that would be kind of a waste since he wouldn't really know what they were, so I set up a trust fund that will help support him while he's growing up and then pay for all his stuff at Hogwarts."

"That's wonderful, Harry," Hermione replied.

Harry shrugged and said,

"It will help take the pressure off his grandmother. She's got enough to deal with."

Hermione just smiled and gave his arm a squeeze. At this point Fleur came over and crouched down on the floor next to where Harry and Ginny were sitting and said quietly.

“Merci beaucoup, mon frere. Gabi says thees es thee best Christmas she ‘as ever ‘ad. She can’t wait to return to Beauxbaton to tell everyone that ‘arry Potter is ‘er new big brother,” Fleur said with a grin.

“Well, how could I say no, Fleur? Especially with you looking at me that way. Besides she really is a sweet kid and maybe this way she’ll get used to the idea of me as family that way and not...well, ya know, the other stuff.”

“Oh, ‘arry. You bad boy,” she said laughing.

“Look at it this way, Fleur. You know how they say you can pick your friends but not your family?”

“Oui.”

“Well, I can pick both. I was an orphan and only child. Then I got to pick the Weasleys as my family. Well, we sorta picked each other. Now I can add you and Gabi as sisters. Doesn’t get much better than that.”

Her smile grew soft and her face took on a thoughtful expression. She looked at her sister-in-law and said,

“You are a very smart girl, Geenny. You were right to wait until ‘e, ‘ow you say, came around.”

Ginny smiled at Fleur and said,

“I know. I think I knew it that day on the platform when he and Ron went off to school together. I knew for sure that day in the Chamber of Secrets,” she said and smiled at Harry.

Harry smiled back and then exclaimed,

“Holy cow, I almost forgot. Hey, Kreacher,” he called.

With a pop the little house elf appeared standing on the back of the small chair Harry was sharing with Ginny. Both the Grangers and Delacours looked startled at his sudden appearance.

“Yes, Master Harry?”

“I have a present for you, Kreacher. Merry Christmas,” Harry said as he handed the house elf a small package.

“Master Harry does not give Kreacher clothes?” the little elf asked apprehensively.

“No, Kreacher. Although I’m still waiting for your answer.”

Kreacher did not respond but opened the package carefully. He withdrew a small tea towel that had been dyed in the Gryffindor colors. It was embroidered so that when he wore it Hogwarts read across the top front with the school emblem centered underneath. On the back was the word, ‘Coach’ across the top and a broom stick underneath. In addition, there was a small silver whistle on a chain. The little elf fingered each item and looked at them with a funny, almost sad look on his face. He looked down at Harry from his perch on the chair and said,

“All house elves should be as lucky as Kreacher.”

Then he popped out of sight. Harry smiled as Ginny hugged his arm.

“I think he was very moved, Harry. That was a wonderful gift.”

This was seconded by most of those in the room. There was another pop followed by the sound of a whistle being blown. Kreacher was standing atop the empty fireplace mantle wearing his new tea towel, the chain of the whistle around his neck and the whistle held in his hand near his mouth.

“Merry Christmas, Master Harry. Kreacher’s gift for Master Harry is to say ‘yes’.”

“That’s great, Kreacher. In that case, here, catch.”

Harry pulled something out of a small bag and threw it to the house elf. Kreacher let go of his whistle and caught the object which turned out to be a small sweatshirt done up exactly the same as the tea towel. The little elf smiled widely, the first time any one of them could remember seeing that and then popped out of sight. Harry sat back with a very satisfied smile on his face,

“Now this is what I call a perfect Christmas.”

The remainder of the holiday break passed quietly. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley spent a good deal of time walking through and around the Burrow, discussing what kinds of changes they would like. A representative of the renovation company would be out to the house right after the beginning of the new year to discuss it with them. Harry and Ron spent a fair amount of time playing wizards chess on the new set. Ginny split her time between watching them play and going through her broom kit. Since the broom was back at Hogwarts it was about all she could do.

Then it was time to get on the train and head back for the second semester. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were there to see them off of course and they met the Grangers as they were bringing Hermione. Mrs. Weasley gave them each a hug and for Harry she said,

“Thank you, Harry, for a Christmas none of us will ever forget.”

“Thank you, Mum, for all the Christmases I have to look forward to.”

The ride back was relatively quiet with just the three of them in the compartment playing Gin Rummy and talking about the holiday. Ginny commented on how very generous Harry had been but also how thoughtful and how appropriate the gifts were. She thought he had gone to such an awful lot of trouble.

“It’s not trouble if you’re happy doing it, sweetheart. I know you know what my life story is and the idea of growing up in the Dursleys house. But I don’t think you know, really know, what it was like. You grew up

in a family full of people who loved you. Sure, your brothers would pick on you from time to time or maybe tell you to get lost. But if you were ever in trouble they'd be right there for you. I grew up in a house where I was despised for who and what I was. I couldn't have any friends because the kids knew that Dudley didn't like me and they couldn't risk him making them a target for his gang of bullies. Then I get thrown into a new and very strange world, alone again until I ran into your mum and five of her red headed kids. You helped me find my way to the train and you're still helping me find my way. Ron was my first friend, my first real friend. You know the rest; you were a big part of it. So don't ever be surprised at what I do for this family, my love. It will never ever be enough."

The first Quidditch match of the new year was held on the Saturday after the start of the new semester and it was cold, biting, bitterly cold, with wind driven snow that was more projectile than precipitation. It was Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Due to their diminished ranks the infamous house had not been able to field a very respectable team but they were more than willing to let cunning replace talent and several opponents had already been put out of action. Combined with weather that could easily turn the tide of any match the outcome was far from certain.

"Ok, Harry, here's the strategy for today's game. You catch the bloody snitch as soon as you can. Nothing fancy, no letting us run up points. Get us out of this miserable excuse for weather otherwise we'll be ice cubes flying on icicles pretty quick," Bee said.

"Got it. I just hope the visibility improves. Can't see the end of your broom stick out there," Harry replied.

"Ok, there's the signal, let's get out there."

The seven Gryffindor's mounted their brooms and zoomed out into the storm. The boundaries of the pitch, the stands and end goals stood out as gray shadows in the white snow. Between the wind and the speed of the brooms, the snowflakes felt like cold fire on his exposed face and the ends of his fingers that protruded from his

gloves. He was glad he had his own goggles. Madame Hooch signaled all to readiness and she then released the balls. Harry saw the snitch take off toward the Slytherin end of the arena. He was after it in a heart beat and soon had it just off the tip of his broom when he was forced to veer to avoid a Slytherin beater that loomed into view from the swirling snow. He cursed under his breath as he barrel rolled to avoid the other flyer. The snitch disappeared. The snow and wind made it hard to hear the announcer, the same Slytherin fifth year as last time but he thought he heard that Gryffindor had scored already. Probably Ginny.

This was impossible, Harry thought to himself. How can you see that damn snitch in snow this thick? It was worse then during the match when he fell off because of the Dementors. He had to continually wipe his goggles to keep the snow from blinding him. At this rate he'd only find the snitch if it ran into him. Which at this point a bludger nearly did and he again had to swerve. This was doing him no good so he put some air underneath him and climbed a bit. He slowed as much as he could and remain stable in the air. He heard the crowd roar and he figured someone scored again, or made a good save. He closed his eyes for a moment and thought about the snitch and it seemed as if he could see it, buzzing madly against the wind at the midfield line near the sideline. Harry opened his eyes and looked down but couldn't even see the field. But when he closed his eyes and concentrated it was there again.

He nosed the broom down in a shallow circling dive as if he were searching, as he was indeed but by different means, and with eyes closed he sensed the pesky little ball come closer and closer. He could see it begin to move off against the wind along the sideline toward the Gryffindor goal. Harry couldn't see anything else but the snitch as he concentrated hard on where it was and staying on its tail. He wasn't sure why he continued in this way other then to say it felt 'right'. As if it sensed him coming up behind it, the snitch darted off but Harry was able to track it now. As it sped off he followed, kicking up his speed. The snitch began a series of dizzying maneuvers made all the more difficult due to the ever shifting winds tossing it all about. Harry seemed to be making instinctive adjustments and as they continued to duel at a high speed he was closing on it. Finally within striking distance Harry urged his broom to one final spurt and he

caught hold of the golden sphere and his eyes flew open. They opened just in time for Harry to see the shape of a VIP seating tower loom up out of the snow and he yanked hard on the broom to turn it but all it did was cause him to hit the wall broadside instead of head on. He crashed into the tower just below the railing in full view of members of the faculty and other important wizards and witches who were often invited to matches. He felt the jarring shock and then the blackness washed over him.

“Harry? Harry? Are you in there?”

The voice of Madame Pomfrey began to filter through to his consciousness. The best answer he could muster was a weak,

“Mmmmmphff.”

The blackness welled up again and he heard nothing for a while. After that while was up, he again heard the familiar voice calling him from the other side of the darkness.

“Harry, can you hear me at all?”

“Uhhh, I think so, it’s Madame Pomfrey, right?”

“Yes, Harry it is. How are you feeling?”

“Don’t know, haven’t checked yet,” he replied from a long way off.

He tried to check on how he was feeling. His head was ringing. He felt like how a burlap bag full of broken glass should feel. His whole right side felt like one long, deep toothache. He was sure he had some sort of knot on the right side of his head. He knew that he hit something hard and logic told him he hit it with his right side. Ah, the tower. Now it was making some sense. He remembered chasing the snitch and right after catching it he tried to avoid the too close tower and only managed to change how he hit the wall.

“Um, I feel like one big bruise,” Harry replied weakly.

“Ah, well, that’s appropriate since you are one big bruise, at least your right side is, from head to ankle. Harry, didn’t we talk about you staying out of my hospital wing this year?”

“Yes, ma’am. I said I’d try. Guess I didn’t try hard enough.”

As he talked and exercised his brain more he found everything around him becoming clearer if not finely focused as yet. He wondered how long it had been. Oddly, he remembered Oliver Wood telling him that he was unconscious for a week after his first match.

“How long has it been, Madame Pomfrey?”

“About eight hours, Harry. It’s just after sunset.”

Harry opened his eyes and tried to focus on the area around him. The lighting was dimmed and he could make out the vague shape of Madame Pomfrey. He blinked a few more times and she started to assume a more regular appearance. He let his eyes sweep around his bed. He thought he saw something perched on the top rail of the bed’s footboard.

“Kreacher? Is that you?” Harry said, sounding a bit perplexed.

“Yes, Master Harry, Kreacher it is,” the little house elf replied.

“He’s been there since they first brought you in, Harry. Hadn’t said a word or moved a muscle until now. Just sat there and watched you.”

“Master Harry will get better now?”

“Yeah, I think so, Kreacher. I’ll be stiff for a while I guess but I should be ok, shouldn’t I?” the last being directed at Madame Pomfrey.

“Yes, Harry, I’d think so but since you did take a nasty knock on the head, I’ve sent word to St. Mungo’s. Dr. Medford will be here tomorrow morning. So you are to stay here and get some rest. I’ll have a little something for you to eat soon.”

“Alright, Madame Pomfrey,” Harry said but he did wince at the sound of Dr. Medford’s name.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like the tall older wizard. It was just that he expected the doctor to be none too happy being dragged all the way out here for something like this. He looked back to where Kreacher was still perched at the foot of his bed, those big sad liquid eyes staring back at him.

“Kreacher, can you do me a favor? Can you go find Ginny and Hermione and let them know that I’m awake and doing ok, please?”

“Kreacher can do that most easily, Master Harry.”

But instead of disappearing he simply hopped down off the bed and went to the door between the ward and the waiting room. He opened the door and said,

“Master Harry tells Kreacher to tell you he is awake and doing ok.”

Within seconds the door was pushed open and Ginny and Hermione were hurrying in. There was a babble of voices in the hall way. Madame Pomfrey scurried down the aisle between the beds and said,

“Here, now, what’s this?”

“I’m sorry, Madame Pomfrey. I wanted Kreacher to let them know I was okay. I thought they’d be in the tower,” Harry said apologetically, his voice still low.

“Well, Mr. Potter,” the nurse said in her best stern voice, “truth be told, that waiting room has been full to capacity all afternoon. And you weren’t my only patient, just my worst and last. As you can see, Miss Weasley is somewhat worse for wear.”

Harry turned his head sharply, too sharply in fact, and as his eyes swam with the pain he could see that Ginny had a bandage on her cheek and her right arm was bandaged at the wrist. She gave Harry a weak smile as she came to sit at his side.

"It's not much, Harry. Had a run in with a bludger I couldn't see in all that snow. But we did win Harry. It was fifty to thirty when you grabbed the snitch so we won by a hundred and seventy points. We have a commanding lead for the cup. Jerry had a mid-air collision with a Slytherin chaser. He got some bruises and the chaser broke a couple of ribs, but Madame Pomfrey got him sorted out already. You got the worst of it, as usual. Most of us didn't see it but we all heard the people in the VIP box shouting when you came out of the snow and went sideways into the tower. You went through the bottom of the railing and wound up at the feet of the spectators in the first row. Madame Hooch flew in and whistled the game over when she saw you had the Snitch in your hand. She must have bewitched the whistle because it sounded like the Hogwarts Express it was so loud."

Ginny said this all in a rush as if she was afraid if she stopped she'd start to cry. Her eyes were watery and her hand was lightly resting on Harry's arm. She looked at the floor and then back at Harry's bruised and scratched face.

"There's something else, Harry," her face a mask of dismay.

"Oh no, please tell me I didn't lose another broom," Harry said in a panicky voice, remembering what had happened the last time he flew in weather this bad.

"No, Harry, you didn't lose it, but it did get pretty banged up. A lot of the bristles were snapped or missing and the handle is all scratched up. The footrest is bent up pretty badly too."

Harry just let out a groan. The broom meant a lot more to him than being a valuable possession. It was the only thing that his godfather, Sirius Black, had given to him as a present, something he had selected himself.

"It might not be too bad though, Harry. It just happened that two men from the Nimbus Company were there in that box. Professor McGonagall let them take it and they are going to try and fix it. One of them told Bee that if you wanted to they'd replace it with a Firebolt II but we all thought you'd want that one back."

"Too right I do. I'm surprised they'd want to do that after that fiasco. Not exactly a poster boy for flying their broom with that crack up," Harry said a bit ruefully.

Ginny was dumbstruck but Hermione let out an exasperated sound and fixed Harry with a glare, her fists on her hips. She kept her voice low out of deference to Harry's condition.

"Are you kidding me, Harry? Now I may not like to fly or be any good at it, but I know good flying, no, let me correct that, phenomenal flying when I see it. Nobody could see everything that went on but we saw enough to know that you were on that snitch's tail like you were using radar."

Ginny looked at Hermione with a quizzical look but Harry knew what she meant.

"You looked like you knew exactly where you were going all the time and making all your usual moves. Everyone else was floundering around out there, half blind and bumping into each other. Most of the goal points were scored by accident, I think."

"I know two of my three goals were," Ginny said. "I'd just try and figure out where the goals were and wait for a break in the snow and let fly. That had to be the worst ever, but Hermione is right, Harry. Everyone who saw you said the same thing. Bee said you went zipping right past her at one point and she swears your goggles were covered with snow and you might as well have been flying with your eyes closed."

"I was," Harry said quietly.

"What?" the girls said in unison.

"When I was chasing the snitch I was doing it with my eyes closed."

They both looked at him in disbelief.

"What do you mean, with your eyes closed?" Hermione asked.

"You know, eyelids down, can't see out," Harry replied.

Then he took a breath, but not a deep one since the ribs on his right side ached.

"I was having as much trouble as everyone else seeing in that bloody snow. I couldn't figure out how to see the snitch so I went up higher and sort of hovered trying to think of what to do. I closed my eyes and thought of where the snitch might be in weather like this and I got this picture of it in my head and it looked like it was down by the sideline near center pitch so I headed down that way. I still couldn't see it with my eyes open so I closed them again and there it was about thirty feet ahead so I just kept them closed and went after it like any other match. Problem is I can't see anything else. I think I know when I went by Bee but of course I didn't see the tower coming and..."

He shrugged.

Hermione looked at Ginny, both of them shaking their heads. Ginny was the first to speak,

"You know what drives me crazy about him? He can talk about doing something no one else has ever heard of so casually and then just shrug. Oh, I just climbed Mt. Everest bare footed but it was no big deal," she said in a bad imitation of Harry.

Hermione began to giggle and then laugh as did Ginny. Harry was looking at them through slitted eyes.

"Alright, ladies," Madame Pomfrey said. "That will be enough for now. You can go and spread the word that Harry is whole if somewhat battered. Say your good byes and then off with you."

Ginny leaned in and gave her bruised hero a brief kiss.

"I'll see you in the morning, Harry. Try not to hurt yourself any more, ok?"

"I will if you will," he said looking meaningfully at her forearm.

She smiled at him and then got up, giving Hermione room to give Harry a little hug and then looked at him closely, her hand brushing back his unruly hair.

"It is an amazing thing you've described, Harry. You know, if you live long enough to become an Auror, you're quite likely to stand the wizarding world on its ear. See you in the morning, Harry."

"Guess I'll have to send an owl to Mum in the morning. I'm sure she'll be thrilled to hear about this, Harry. And just wait till Fleur gets word of it," the last was said with a nasty little laugh.

Once Ginny had come to understand and accept the relationship that had developed between Harry and Fleur, one of a mothering big sister, she took a perverse delight in teasing Harry about it whenever possible. He just groaned and rolled his eyes.

The two young women just laughed again and blew Harry kisses and then left the ward. As they entered the waiting room they were barraged with questions so loudly that Madame Pomfrey had to shoo them all away. As she came back in she looked down on her most frequent charge and smiled,

"Well, Harry, it does appear that you have acquired quite the fan club."

At those words Harry groaned again and said,

"Please don't say those words again, Madame Pomfrey," his face going red under the bruises.

"What words, what did I say, Harry?"

He proceeded to explain what he had found out about his fan club at Beauxbaton. By the time he was done the kindly healer was doing her best to hide her amusement.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I don't mean to make light of your situation, but considering your usual unassuming nature it is funny in a way. Well, let me get you something to eat. I'll be right back."

Kreacher, who had been standing quietly by the door this whole time looked at Harry and said,

“If Master Harry has no need of Kreacher at this time, Kreacher will go and tell the other house elves that Master Harry is well. They have been much concerned.”

“Ok, Kreacher, that’s fine. See you later.”

Harry noticed that Kreacher was wearing his Quidditch themed tea towel. Most of the Hogwarts elves were still not big on the idea of freedom and clothes. The little elf bowed and popped out of sight. Harry’s dinner was similar to the ones he had during the latter stage of his last stay in the ward, a good stew with some bread and cheese washed down with pumpkin juice. It wasn’t more then a half an hour after he had finished and he was laying there thinking of nothing of much importance when there was a timid knock on the ward door. Madame Pomfrey bustled down the aisle and opened the door. Harry couldn’t see past her but he could see that Madame Pomfrey was looking down at whomever she was speaking to. She looked back at Harry,

“Are you up to seeing a visitor, Harry?” she asked him.

“Sure, Madame Pomfrey.”

She turned back to the visitor, “You may come in but not for long and please speak softly.”

When Harry saw who walked into the room, he knew speaking softly wouldn’t be a problem. Softly was the only way she could speak. It was Abigail Westwood. She came to stand next to Harry’s bed and looked down at him with those big dark eyes.

“Hello, Mr. Potter,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“Hello, Miss Westwood. It’s very nice of you to come and see me.”

"I saw what happened to you at the Quidditch match, sir. It was the scariest thing I'd ever seen. When I heard that you were feeling better I thought I'd come up and visit. That's what family does for one another, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is and I'm very glad you did. Would you like to sit down?" Harry asked.

The diminutive girl sat down and looked at Harry. She saw the scratches and bruises on his face and right hand.

"Does it hurt a lot, sir?"

"It's pretty much a dull ache right now, Miss Westwood. I imagine Madame Pomfrey will give me something later to help me sleep. Tomorrow should be ok I hope."

"Your flying was really amazing, sir. Everyone around me was yelling and acting really amazed, at least when they could see you. We were in the stands near the wall you crashed into. You just came out of a big swirl of snow; it looked like you had already caught the snitch, which no one could figure out how you did it, and then you went sideways into the wall. Everyone screamed at that though."

"Well, I guess that's what happens when you focus on just one thing and don't pay any attention to the other things around you. A lesson learned the hard way, I guess," he said with a smile.

"I made this for you, sir. It's a get well card. It's a muggle kind of thing."

"Yes, I know about those. Thank you, it was very nice of you to do that for me."

Harry took the card that she offered to him. She had made it out of a heavy piece of parchment and using several different colors of ink, she had drawn Harry flying on his broom in much better weather. The likeness was remarkable.

"You drew this, Miss Westwood?"

“Yes, sir. I like to draw.”

“You’re very talented, this looks just like me,” Harry said as he opened the card and read what she had written.

Through the darkness of fright

against the shadows of fear

we prevail against the night

with strength of family near.

He was taken aback to say the least, he was expecting some childish words wishing him to get well soon. This was fairly dark and more than a little grown up for an eleven year old.

“If you don’t mind my saying so, Miss Westwood, this poem isn’t exactly what I expected.”

“You don’t like it, sir?” she said, her voice trembling a bit.

“That’s not what I said, Miss Westwood. I would have expected something like ‘sorry you got hurt, get well soon’. Would you like to tell me what inspired you to write this?”

The young girl hung her head down, her face covered by her long hair. When she looked up at Harry, her dark eyes were misted over but more than that they held a deep hurt. She took a deep breath and began to speak in that barely audible whisper.

“When I was six, my parents and I were driving in the car. I was in the back seat. We were coming home from visiting my granma and granpa. I guess I fell asleep because it was late and dark and misty. All of a sudden I heard my mum scream and my dad shouted and something hit the side of the car hard and we went off the road and down a hill and hit something really hard and then the car rolled over.”

Harry watched the little girl's face as she talked, seeing the tears roll down her cheeks, his heart in his throat.

"We were there a long time. It was a dark road with no houses or anything around. I was kinda ok because I was strapped into one of those extra seats but Mum and Dad must have been hurt bad, I could hear them groaning but when I called to them they wouldn't answer. After a while they stopped making any noise at all. It was getting light out when I heard someone outside the car. They shined in lights and called to us. I tried to answer but I don't know if they heard. Then they pulled the doors open and got me out and took me to an ambulance. I called for my mum and dad but they didn't tell me anything. I never saw them again. I used to have such bad dreams about it, too, the crashing, the sounds, the lights. And I felt so alone. That was the worst. Alone in the back of the car."

Harry was looking at this frail little child, nearly overwhelmed by her pain, but something she said caught his attention.

"Miss Westwood...Abigail, you said you used to have nightmares?"

"Yes, sir. I used to have them all the time until the night after you talked to me about being part of the wizarding family. That made me feel better and when I went to bed that night I actually felt kinda happy. I have you and Ginny as big brother and sister and I've made friends here and I don't feel alone anymore. So that's what I meant by the poem. And it kinda fits with what you've said about how to fight the Dark Arts in a way."

The look she gave Harry was sad but oddly hopeful and a little smile was starting to work its way through. His only reaction was to reach his good left arm out to her and when she took his hand he pulled her to the edge of the bed and then despite the pain he wrapped her in both arms and held her close, the top of her head against his cheek and he told her that she would never have to feel alone again. Then he released her and she sat up on the edge of the bed and the tears were happy ones. There she stayed for more than an hour as Harry described the Christmas holiday, leaving out the incident with the erstwhile housebreakers and how much fun it had been. Madame Pomfrey came by at last and said that Harry needed to take his

potion to help him sleep through the night and Abigail left in a decidedly better mood than when she arrived and Harry felt better too.

As Madame Pomfrey measured out the sleeping potion she looked at Harry with an odd expression but simply wished him good night. Harry was asleep in minutes. Sunday morning dawned bright but blustery and cold. Harry could hear that the winds hadn't died down much but at least there was no snow. It was around nine o'clock when a firm knock on the door announced that Dr. Medford had arrived. Madame Pomfrey admitted the tall wizard and he smiled when he saw Harry sitting up in bed.

"Well, Mr. Potter. I hadn't expected to see you so soon again. I understand you took a rather nasty knock to the head this time."

"Um, yes sir, had a run in with a spectators' tower in yesterday's Quidditch match."

"Yes, I caught a complete run down this morning. I arrived early and had the opportunity to have breakfast with my nephew. I think you two are acquainted?"

"Yes, sir, Tom. We met the first night back last semester."

"Well, let's have a look, shall we. Hmm, the external contusion doesn't look too bad. A lot of bruising but at least the impact was spread out over a large area. That bodes well for anything internal."

As he had before, the healer took his hand and placed it on Harry's head, thumb on temple, finger tips at the rear. Once more Harry felt the tingling sensation. The healer had his eyes closed. After a few moments they opened and he released his hold.

"Well, young man, I'd say you avoided any serious trauma. Nothing seems to be disturbed. I do get the impression that you've been working on your control. The patterns I can pick up seem much more orderly, and stronger. That's good. Whatever you've been doing I encourage you to keep at it. Except for crashing into walls. That you should try to avoid whenever possible. Either that or start wearing a helmet."

“Yes, sir. I may do both, just to be safe.”

“Good man. Well, I’m done here. Good bye, Harry. Do try and take care of yourself.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for coming all the way out here.”

“My pleasure, Harry. It’s always good to see the old place.”

Madame Pomfrey came by and asked Harry if he would like to try and get out of bed. If Doctor Medford was satisfied he hadn’t done any serious injury to his head she knew it was best to get him out of bed as soon as possible. Harry’s side was still achy but there were no sharp pains. More like a dull throbbing ache. He managed to limp his way to the washroom and when he slipped off his shirt he winced at the sight of the black and blue bruises that covered his arm and side. He was sure his hip and leg were much the same. After taking care of himself he slowly walked his way back.

“Well, young fellow. How are you feeling?” Madame Pomfrey asked, looking Harry up and down.

“If you have no objections, I’d like to get dressed and go back to the tower, slowly.”

“Hmmm, you do heal quickly and I gave you a little something that will help but with that much bruising nature will have to take its course. Ok, let’s see how you do getting dressed.”

It was slow going but Harry was able to get himself put together in reasonable fashion, although bending everything to get his right sock and shoe on was a trial. He stood up and walked around a bit more. It wouldn’t be easy but he would rather be up and moving then laying on his back in the hospital wing, he’d had enough of that.

“Here, Harry. Try this, it should help going up and down the stairs,” Madame Pomfrey said to Harry as she handed him a cane.

It was a twisted piece of wood with a knob on one end for a handle. Harry took it and thought about the conversations this would start. It was getting on toward lunch so he decided he would make his way to the Great Hall instead of the tower. Half way there he was glad he had the cane to lean on as he descended the staircase. As he was coming down the last few stairs he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Harry, oh I'm so sorry," Ginny said, her voice full of chagrin. "We got up to the hospital wing late and missed you. Madame Pomfrey thought you were going to the tower so we ran back that way. I'm so, so sorry." The last was said as she came down beside him

"It's ok Ginny, I probably should have waited but I was impatient to get out of there. Madame Pomfrey is a wonderful person but I'm getting tired of that place," he said with a grin.

"How do you feel, sweetheart?"

"Very sore, very stiff and very hungry. Give me a hand down these stairs, would you?"

Harry carefully slipped his left arm over Ginny's shoulder and leaned his weight on her using the cane for balance on the right side. Carefully they made their way to the bottom of the staircase. Harry had intended to make it on his own into the Great Hall but Ginny would have none of it. It was still a bit early so there were only a few students in the Hall but for those that were there Harry became the center of their attention. He did what he could to smile and nod as Ginny led him over to the table. He settled slowly on to the bench with a sigh of relief. Ginny smiled down at him.

"Don't we look the pair, Harry? Bruised and bandaged."

"Maybe, but even with bandages and bruises you're still the prettiest girl in the school," he said with a smile and a wink.

She just laughed and then sat down next him and waited as other students began to filter in. The Gryffindors all were thrilled to see Harry and stopped to congratulate him for his performance and ask how he was doing. A lot of the students from the other houses would

give waves and offer well wishes but more than a few also looked at him with questioning glances and whispers to their friends. Hermione dropped down across from them and said,

“Harry, are you sure you should be here? You still look pretty beat up,” she said with genuine concern.

“That’s because I am still pretty beat up, but I couldn’t stand being up there anymore. Dr. Medford said my head was ok, so Madame Pomfrey said I was alright to leave.”

Right about then Abigail came in with several of her housemates. Her face lit up when she saw Harry.

“Hello, Mr. Potter. I didn’t think you’d be out of the hospital wing so soon.”

“Hello, Miss Westwood. Yes, I’m feeling a great deal better. A special visit and get well card helped a great deal,” Harry said with a big smile.

Abigail went bright red and giggled.

“Hello Ginny, hi Hermione,” she said between laughing.

“Hiya, Abigail. How’s my little sister doing this morning,” Ginny asked.

“I’m doing good, Ginny, thanks. Oops, gotta go get my seat, see you later,” she said and then dashed off.

“What was that about a visit and card, Harry?” Ginny asked.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out the carefully folded sheet of parchment. He handed it over to Ginny.

“Abigail came up after dinner last night to give me that.”

Ginny looked at the drawing on the cover and then showed it to Hermione.

“Wow, Harry, that’s a terrific likeness. She drew that? She’s quite an artist.”

“Read what she wrote inside,” he said a little subdued.

Ginny opened up the parchment so both she and Hermione could read it. When they were both done they looked at each other and then at Harry, both looking puzzled.

“She wrote that, Harry? That’s pretty deep and dark for a child her age.”

“That’s what I thought. When I asked her about it, she told me how she became an orphan.”

Harry told them the whole story. By the time he was done Ginny and Hermione were stone faced and silent. They both turned and looked down the aisle to where Abigail sat. Hermione was the first to break the silence.

“Kind of spooky when you think about it. The two of you have so much in common, Harry.”

“I thought so, too,” Harry replied. “I guess I’ll have to keep my eye on her. It’s what big brothers do, you know?”

“And so your family grows,” Ginny said kindly.

He gave a little smile but any further comments were cut off by another wave of well wishers. Lunch passed easily enough although Harry had to contend with eating mostly with his left hand. After lunch was over Harry had to consider what he was going to do for the rest of the day. He didn’t particularly like the idea of climbing all the way up to the common room, just to have to come down again for dinner. After some thought he called Kreacher who promptly went to his room and gathered up some books and supplies and Harry spent the afternoon in the Great Hall studying. He would have to get up ever half hour or so to stretch his sore muscles and he was frequently interrupted by the occasional student or staff member inquiring about

his well being or commenting on his flying. All in all it was a good afternoon.

The following few weeks were generally good ones as well. By the middle of the week following his crash he was able to discontinue the use of the cane. On Friday, he received an owl from the Nimbus Company that his broom was well on its way to being repaired and he should have it by the following mid week. Included was a copy of the Daily Prophet that had a story about the match as the leading item on the sports page. No actual photo was available but a pencil sketch had been rendered based on eye witness accounts. Harry could only shake his head then he handed it off to Ginny.

“Well, Harry, its better then all those horrible things they used to print about you. I don’t think much of the picture though. Abigail’s was much better.”

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it? She’s a very smart kid, too. Right at the top of my class. More and more she’s reminding me of you, Hermione, in that way.”

The bitter chill of January gave way to the bone numbing cold of February. Harry had his broom back as good as new. A bit better in fact as they used the new finish that came on the Firebolt IIs to redo the handle. Practices had to be short as the danger of frostbite was a real consideration. Many of the portraits were commenting that this was the coldest winter they could remember, and for some that was a long time.

Harry was taking the time to drop in on Professor Dumbledore every couple of weeks or so to discuss some of the finer points of wand work and charm casting. He remembered what the charms examiner had said during his OWL test and he was hoping the former headmaster could help him sharpen his skills. Between the three of them, that is Harry and Professors Flitwick and Dumbledore, Harry was acquiring a precision and accuracy with his wand that was very impressive. It spilled over into his transfiguration efforts where the combination of wand work and visualization was making things

almost easy. Almost. As Professor McGonagall assessed the extent of Harry's awakened capabilities she began to push him hard at every turn. Harry would swear she was lying awake at night thinking up tougher and tougher things for him to try. But so far he had been able to make the necessary transfiguration, although one or two did take him a couple of tries.

Potions and herbology were likewise going well. It was largely a matter of memorization from the text books and paying attention in class. Bill's advanced DADA class was for Harry the most interesting, not surprisingly, because it involved so many practical exercises. They were more along the lines of what the late Professor Lupin had been doing, only more so. Bill's assignments of hunting for treasure for Gringotts had given him plenty of experience at breaking curses and dealing with the nasty creatures that were often around old tombs and temples. The three books that Harry had given him for Christmas added a new dimension and all in all it was more like an adventure than a class.

The one class that seemed much like old times was Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, regardless of weather, would hold the class somewhere on the grounds near his house. Since this was an advanced class many of the lessons were conducted on trips into the dark forest. Hagrid was always Hagrid but with a few years of teaching under his very wide belt he had more confidence and without all the sniping from the Malfoy gang his classes were informative and interesting. All things considered Harry was feeling very good about his chances where NEWTs were concerned.

It was late in February when Bill had asked Harry to provide the sixth and seventh years with another lecture but in this case it was to be more of a discussion than anything else. There would only be a couple of dozen students in one of the larger classrooms. Harry suggested that they just pull all the chairs out and put them in a circle and he would just talk from there. Bill thought that was a good idea. So Harry and the students, with Bill sitting off to the side, held a wide ranging discussion of the things Harry encountered during his pursuit of Voldemort's Horcruxes last year. A great many questions were posed to Harry but the one that really seemed to get his attention was

posed by a sixth year Slytherin, the only one from that house in the room.

“You know, we talk about the Dark Arts as if they are something real and tangible and evil. But is it? Are the spells and curses and potions in themselves the bad thing or is it really the practitioner that’s the evil one.”

“Do you mean can a good wizard use the Dark Arts for something he or she thinks is good and still remain good?” Harry asked, pursing his lips. Bill had leaned forward.

“No, I don’t think so. But maybe not for the reason you might think. A witch or wizard could use the killing curse to try and defend themselves I guess. Or the Cruciatus curse to disable an opponent, I know I did that time in the Ministry but to really work well those curses need evil intent to give them real power. But I think the real problem lies with us, the witch or wizard. How good is a good wizard really? Is he completely free of evil or is it just that the good in him outweighs the evil and keeps it in check? Does the use of the Dark Arts help the dark side of us grow to overpower the good? I don’t think I’d like to find out. Maybe that was what doomed Tom Riddle to the life he lived. The balance was too delicate and once he started to dabble on the dark side he just couldn’t stop. It’s a pity really. With all that talent, think of what he could have accomplished if he hadn’t gone over like that.”

The cold of February spilled over into March with numerous storms buffeting the castle and keeping the grounds buried in snow. Even Hagrid was hard pressed to keep paths open for his students. He eventually admitted defeat and began conducting classes in a dungeon level room and limiting his discussion to the smaller creatures that he could bring along in the pockets of his moleskin coat. It wasn’t until almost the middle of April that the first hint of warmth began to be felt on the spring breezes that replaced the winter gales. The last Quidditch match for the Gryffindors was played above a pitch that could be more aptly described as a bog. Puddles of standing water were in evidence all over the field which was much

more brown with mud than green with early grass. But since the sky was clear and the sun strong, it didn't matter, as this was a flyers game. Based on the premise that Harry outclassed every other seeker in the school, the Hufflepuffs had devised a novel, if somewhat desperate strategy. In addition to their own seeker, they placed one chaser and one beater at high altitude to try and help their own seeker spot the snitch.

The obvious disadvantage was that the two remaining Hufflepuff chasers would be hopelessly outclassed and forced into a delaying strategy, hoping to keep the Gryffindor goal point score low and giving their seeker a chance to win it for them. Harry would have none of it. As soon as he saw how their strategy was developing he simply closed his eyes and concentrated on the snitch. He 'saw' it just behind the Gryffindor middle goal post. Harry then dove toward the Hufflepuff goals. When he saw the three snitch 'seekers' try to follow he pulled another broom tip 'bootleggers' turn and rocketed off toward the Gryffindor end. He saw the snitch dart out from behind the goal and he took off after it. It made a series of zig-zags over the Gryffindor stands but Harry stayed right on it. It made a sudden ninety degree turn that took it out over the field at near ground level.

Harry could sense more than see a Hufflepuff flyer coming in on his right side to try and block him but he did a rolling loop up and over the flyer that so surprised her that she failed to recover and she hit the field in a spray of water and mud as she slid for yards. The snitch then pulled up and began to climb skyward passing through a pair of Gryffindors who peeled off in different directions as Harry went right between them. He could see that the Hufflepuff seeker had gained a lot of altitude earlier and was now power diving on the snitch as it tried to elude Harry. It was going to be close but Harry urged his broom with everything he had and it almost flew out from under him. He actually whipped past the snitch and he had to grab it from the left side as he went by. He was still accelerating upward with the snitch in his hand and he had to pull back and put the broom into a dive. As he got closer to the pitch he began a slow circling descent and he could see that his teammates had chosen to remain hovering just above the field to avoid going ankle deep in the mud. He came into a hover at Ginny's side and she was grinning ear to ear.

“Way to go, Harry. We were up forty nil. It’s going to be nearly impossible for anyone to catch us up now. That was some beautiful flying, and with your eyes open too,” she said laughing.

“Thanks, Ginny. Yeah, I figured I didn’t need to go crashing into anything today. Um, I don’t know about you guys, but I’d rather not start hiking through all this mud. What do you say we just fly back to the school?”

This suggestion was greeted with enthusiastic nods and so the Gryffindor team was the first back to the tower common room where the near certainty of the Quidditch cup resulted in a celebration that lasted all afternoon long.

With the completion of the Quidditch season for the Gryffindor’s Harry began what he called his sprint to the finish line preparing for his NEWTs. The time that had been given over to practice now became additional study sessions. He did take time on Saturdays to go into Hogsmeade to visit George and Ron and more and more often, Angelina. It was during one of these trips in mid May when a solution to one of Harry’s problems was found. While sitting off to the side of the store watching Ron and George deal with customers, Angelina had made a casual comment about how interesting she had come to find the idea of operating a shop and wondered how she might do that for herself. Harry looked at her for a moment and then said,

“What about an ice cream parlor?”

“What do you mean, Harry?” she asked.

“Florean Fortescue’s ice cream parlor has been closed since he was grabbed by Riddle’s gang. I’ve had Gringotts looking but there’s no trace of any relatives. The landlord has tried to rent the space but no one has taken it yet. If you’re interested, I’ll put up the starting costs and first years rent. Same deal as the others. Twenty five percent and once the initial investment is paid off it goes into the relief fund. What do you think?”

Angelina was very excited and she called George over to ask his opinion. He thought it was a great idea and didn’t fail to mention

they'd be practically neighbors. Ron wandered over and when he heard the idea he mentioned that it had great possibilities for some combined marketing. Some Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes on display at the ice cream shop and a freezer with some take away items in it in the joke shop. Angelina eagerly agreed. She had missed Fortescue's as well and was happy to be able to bring it back.

"Ok, I'll send an owl to Gringotts and you should go see them on Monday, maybe take George with you."

"Actually, mate, I think Ron should go. He's got the better head for business."

"Sure," Ron said. "I'd be glad to."

Harry left the joke shop feeling pretty satisfied. Ginny had been wandering the shops while all this had been going on and Harry caught up with her as she was coming out of the Quidditch store.

"Well, Harry, you're certainly looking like the kneazle that caught the garden gnome. What's up?"

When Harry explained his latest venture, Ginny got very excited and said,

"That's terrific, Harry. I know she was hoping to get picked up by a Quidditch team but it just didn't work out." She gave Harry a thoughtful look. "You know, dearest, if you keep going on this way, you'll wind up owning a quarter of all of Diagon Alley."

"Oh, no. Just the part that was shut down by Riddle and his gang."

Ginny smiled and took hold of Harry's arm and they began their walk back to school. As they strolled Ginny looked up at Harry.

"Um, sweetheart, I have a bit of a confession to make. I've been keeping a secret from you."

"Oh, really? And what would that be?"

“Since right after the second Quidditch match, you know, the one you got hurt in, I’ve been getting some feelers from a few Quidditch teams about trying out this summer. Mostly for reserve team spots but one is for an all girls team called the Holyhead Harpies that needs a chaser. What do you think?”

“I think if it’s something you want to do, do it. And I’ll be right there in the front row cheering you on.”

Ginny pulled him down a bit to plant a big kiss on his cheek and then put her head on his shoulder as they walked along.

With that bit of business behind him Harry could now fully concentrate on the last few weeks of classes and study before the beginning of his NEWTs. The stress had been building up on the fifth and seventh years who were scheduled for their OWLs and NEWTs respectively. Madame Pomfrey was busy with students whose nerves had been worn down by all the work. Harry, Hermione and Ginny were sitting at their usual places in the Great Hall looking at the schedule of tests. Harry had one each day and Wednesday had an additional in the afternoon. Ginny was only taking three, which left her Wednesday and Friday off. Hermione was taking six like Harry but her schedule had her doubled up on two days and off on Thursday. Monday had all three of them taking their Charms test in the morning.

It was a scene reminiscent of their OWLs but with fewer students and a longer test time. Harry was put through a grueling series of tests, having to perform a number of spells both simple and complex and in some cases under duress as the examiners would throw spells at him to try and distract him. Others tried to curse him and he had to respond with appropriate counters. Despite their every effort Harry never missed a beat. His charm work was letter perfect and his counter curses were done blindingly fast. In several instances he managed to counter hex the curse thrower much to the amusement of the other examiners. He even pulled out his Patronus when one wiley old witch threw an illusion of a dementor at him. His stag ran right through the ethereal dementor and then ran a circuit around the room and then came to stand in front of Harry, tossing its huge rack of antlers before disappearing.

"Well, Mr. Potter. That was quite a display. I don't think we've seen anything like this in many years," the senior examiner told him.

The witch who had tried the dementor on him nodded and said thoughtfully,

"Puts you in mind of Albus Dumbledore, the way he uses that wand."

Harry was smiling to himself, knowing that the former Headmaster had a lot to do with how well Harry was using his wand now. When he came out of the room he didn't see Hermione or Ginny and figured they either were already done or had gotten a late start. He headed down to the Great Hall for lunch and found them there already. They waved him over.

"Good grief, Harry. You were in there forever. What did they have you doing?" Hermione asked.

"A lot of spell throwing, counter curses, that sort of thing. Why? How long were you in there?"

"We've been waiting for you for over an hour, Harry, and you went in first. Sounds like they were really putting you through the wringer," Ginny said.

"Well, they are from the Ministry. Maybe they knew I wanted to be an Auror and were seeing how much I could take."

"You might be right, Harry. I think you may be in for a tough week," Hermione said with a rueful smile.

The next day they had Potions together. While not as physically taxing as Charms had been, this one really tested their memories. A number of vials, jars and bowls were arranged on several tables with only numbers to identify them. Each student had to write down the name of the ingredient next to the number for the item on display. When they were done they had to take another sheet which listed various ingredients and write down what each ingredient was for. Next came the practical exercise. Each of them was given the name

of three potions and they had to select the correct ingredients and brew up the required concoction. They had started at eight and weren't released until after two in the afternoon. This was partially due to a Hufflepuff student making a mistake and blowing up her work station. While there were no serious injuries it took time to clear the smoke and get everyone back to work. It appeared that at least for the practical the three Gryffindors were in good shape as their potions came out fine. They went to the Great Hall where a late lunch was still available and ate in exhausted silence.

Harry was dreading tomorrow. He had Transfiguration in the morning and Herbology in the afternoon. He had these to himself as Ginny and Hermione had not taking these courses.

When he entered the classroom for Transfiguration he saw that the room was set up in several stages. A series of objects were placed on tables at each station and a witch or wizard was standing behind each one. Students would be required to transfigure each item based on the verbal instruction of the examiner. Things were progressing well for Harry as he made his way through the array of items, each transfiguration coming out perfectly. He had just finished changing a fragile porcelain figurine into the real thing when a shout came from the far side of the room. A student was supposed to turn a vase into a koala bear but instead got a North American brown bear. The big bruin charged, knocking the student aside. Harry aimed his wand at the approaching beast and yelled,

“Stupefy!”

The bear went down in a heap. The examiner flicked her wand and the bear was a vase again. Harry's examiner looked over his glasses at Harry,

“We will annotate that to your Charms test score, Mr. Potter. Please proceed with the next task.”

Fortunately the rest of the morning was far less exciting. He only had time to grab a quick sandwich and dash across the grounds to the hothouses for his Herbology exam. This was similar to Potions, with a theoretical and then a practical. One of the green houses was

arrayed with a large number of plants. Each student had to identify the plant and describe its major characteristics, dangers and/or uses. In another hothouse, work stations were arranged and each candidate was required to demonstrate the proper technique for trimming, harvesting or planting depending on the request from the examiner. It was close to dinner time before Harry trudged out hot, dirty and hungry. He was tired but he was more than half way home.

Care of Magical creatures was on Thursday and the examiners pulled out all the stops. The entire event was held outdoors where a number of exotic and in many cases dangerous creatures were held in paddocks and cages and each student had to perform what ever was dictated by the examiner. Harry got a break when he was directed to approach a Hippogriff and if possible mount it. He knew this technique cold and as he approached the fierce looking beast he recognized it as none other than Buckbeak. After Sirius had died Hagrid had reclaimed the creature clandestinely and kept him hidden from the old Ministry.

Harry performed the required bow which was returned almost instantly by his old comrade. He approached the Hippogriff and as he got close he could hear an almost plaintive note as Buckbeak 'spoke' to him. He placed his hand on the feathered head and said quietly,

"Hello, old friend. Yes, I miss him, too. What would you say to a quick spin around the grounds?"

The proud creature tossed its head and knelt down so Harry could climb aboard. The examiners thought this was the end but Buckbeak took a few strides and launched himself with his massive wings. Harry could hear a few shouts but soon he was high above the school grounds and thoroughly enjoying the ride. They stayed aloft for perhaps fifteen minutes and then came in for a landing. As Buckbeak came to a stop, Harry vaulted off the creature's broad shoulders and took one of the dead ferrets off the nearby rack and threw it to 'Beaky'. He walked past the amazed group of students and examiners feeling oddly melancholy.

This left him with Defense Against the Dark Arts on Friday. Harry wondered if this was going to be similar to what happened in Charms.

The candidate students, including Ginny and Hermione, were taken to the Room of Requirement which had been turned into what could only be described as a Wizard's Hell. Each student was required to enter a portal that began a series of traps, attacks and dark puzzles that made the TriWizard Maze look like a kiddie ride. Harry was the last to go in. There was darkness, there was fog followed by blinding sun. Doors had to be magically opened, traps disarmed or bypassed and there were more than a few nasty creatures including boggarts. Oddly enough his boggart became a crying Ginny. This startled him but when he recovered he simply pictured her the victim of one of George and Fred's jokes and he was able to laugh the boggart away. He also had to confront several illusions based on his confrontations with the Death Eaters and Voldemort. He had guessed right that the Ministry was really putting him to the test. But no matter what they put in front of him it didn't stop him. Each obstacle was overcome, each threat vanquished. It was a long, tedious and at times treacherous journey, but finally he was through. When he came out, sweaty and dirty, he found Hermione and Ginny waiting for him. Ginny flew into his arms, visibly upset.

"What's the matter, Ginny, what happened?"

"Oh, Harry it was horrible. There had one of those boggarts in there and..and..." she couldn't get herself to repeat it.

"Harry, Ginny's boggart was you dead, killed by some dark wizard."

Harry pulled her tightly to him and tried to comfort her. His first reaction was to be angry with the examiners but he knew that they wouldn't know what her worst fear would be. Unfortunately his worst fear had come true. His beloved Ginny in tears because of him.

"The examiners took her out but she was near the end so we're hoping she'll at least get an Acceptable. Looks like you were in there longer than anyone again, Harry. Do you think they're trying to make you fail," Hermione asked quietly.

"No, I don't think so. On the one hand I think they want to see just how much I can handle. On the other I think they don't want to leave

themselves open to criticism about going easy on me to guarantee I'll get in."

Ginny had quieted down and from the circle of Harry's arms said softly,

"Who would want to say anything bad about you, Harry?"

"Probably more than a few people, love. I think I'm just getting a break for now. Once some peoples' memories start to fade I won't be quite the universal hero I am now," he said with a laugh.

She managed to laugh a bit with him and she wiped her tears away. He kept his arm around her shoulder as they walked out. They walked slowly down to the Great Hall. Everyone's exams were over and most were celebrating while others were just quietly decompressing. Harry heard a few of what sounded like Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes going off outside but the celebrating was pretty calm compared to the days of the Weasley twins and their pals. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny sat at their usual spot and they quietly ate while Harry did his best to sooth Ginny's shattered nerves. She had worked very hard all year to keep pace with Harry and Hermione and she had been holding up pretty well but being confronted with the sight of Harry's broken and blasted body was more then she could handle. She was still tucked up tight to Harry's side and he could feel her shivering.

They ate sparingly and tried to talk of nothing important to give Ginny a chance to pull herself together. She was starting to come around when Abigail Westwood came into the Hall. When she saw what was going on at the end of the Gryffindor table she walked over to Ginny and put her arms around her neck from behind.

"What's wrong? Why is Ginny so upset?" she asked in her quiet voice.

"She saw something that scared her during her Defense Against the Dark Arts test, Abigail," Hermione said. "It made her very upset."

Ginny had taken both of Abigail's hands in her's and tried to look back over her shoulder at her.

"It's ok, little sister. Something just took me by surprise."

Abigail rested her cheek on Ginny's head. She could also see Harry from where she stood. Her face took on a strange look and she said,

"You saw something about Mr. Potter, didn't you? Something terrible that scared you a lot. But it wasn't real. You shouldn't ever be afraid of anything that's not real."

"How did you know that, Abigail?" Harry asked her.

"I don't know, I could just feel it," she said.

"Have you ever had feelings like this before, Abigail?" Hermione asked.

"Sometimes. If I think about something, sometimes ideas or pictures sort of pop into my head. Is it a problem?"

Ginny had managed to reach around and pull Abigail up onto her lap. She had her arms wrapped around her tightly.

"Have you ever heard of something like this, Harry, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"This isn't something I know much about. Two years of divination was pretty much a waste except that one night when Professor Trelawney had that vision or whatever. Maybe I should go up and talk to Professor McGonagall."

"Is there something wrong with me?" Abigail asked, her soft voice sounding worried.

"No, no, not wrong," Ginny said soothingly. "But you may have a special gift that the school Head would like to know about."

It looked as if Ginny's concern for Abigail was pushing her own issues aside. Harry stood up and excused himself. He walked up to

the faculty table and gestured to get the Headmistress' attention. She motioned for him to come up to the table.

"Yes, Potter, what is it?" It seemed that she was tired after a week of testing as well.

Harry leaned forward across the table so he could speak quietly. Ginny and Hermione were watching from the back of the Hall but they could see the Professor look around Harry to where they were sitting. They could see Harry continuing to speak and finally she motioned for Ginny to come forward. She put Abigail down and got up, took that small hand in hers and walked with her down the aisle. Many other students were already at their seats and they were watching the pair of them walk to the table.

"Hello, Miss Westwood. Mr. Potter here has told me something about you that's of great interest to us. I trust what he tells me is true?" the Headmistress said.

"If he said that sometimes I see things in my head that have happened to other people, yes ma'am," Abigail said quietly.

Professor McGonagall looked at the slight first year and then at Harry.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. You were right to bring this to my attention. I can understand your interest in this," she said with a small grin. "We will make sure we pay attention to this young lady. Miss Westwood?" she had turned back to the little girl. "I'd like for you to come to my office tomorrow morning right after breakfast. Miss Weasley, would you please come along with her?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Alright, why don't we all enjoy our dinner then," the Professor said by way of dismissal.

Ginny walked Abigail back to her seat at the Ravenclaw table and then joined Harry and Hermione at their seats. Harry served himself and Ginny. Harry kept stealing glances down at where Abigail was sitting. Hermione could see the look on his face.

“What are you thinking about, Harry?”

“I’m not really sure, Hermione. What, or I should say, who have we found here in that little girl?”

“I don’t know, Harry, but she’s special to say the least. I also think she was lucky that you were one of her teachers. I don’t know if any of the others would have taken the interest in her.”

“Well, the regular Professors are pretty busy with all the classes they have to teach.”

“Oh, please, Harry. You were studying for six NEWTs, teaching a bunch of clueless first years. Oh, don’t look at me like that, Harry. I remember what we were like. Yes, yes, I know, I knew all kinds of things out of a book but I didn’t know what actually being a witch was about. Not to mention your Quidditch practice. So you were plenty busy but you still took the time to notice a child who needed noticing.”

Harry shrugged and leaned over toward Ginny and said in a mock whisper.

“I need you to open the air valve in my head, my love, it’s starting to get puffed up.”

Ginny almost spit a mouthful of food across the table as she started to laugh. Hermione didn’t find it funny at all.

“Harry! I swear if you don’t learn to take a compliment from me without making some snide or sarcastic remark, I’ll...I’ll...I’ll never fix your glasses again.”

“Wow, I better behave myself, because nobody does Occular Repairo like you do, Hermione.”

“Of course. Hanging around you, I’ve had lots of practice.”

Ginny gave Hermione a funny look and said,

“Snide? Who says snide?”

Harry and Ginny started laughing and Hermione couldn't help but join in. As if it was a relief valve from all of the tension and high emotion that had built up over the last year they kept on laughing long and loud, attracting a lot of attention but they didn't really seem to care. Tears were rolling down their faces as they looked at each other pointing fingers. Finally, probably because breathing had become something of a chore they wound down and managed to pull themselves together so they could enjoy their dessert.

When Harry went to bed that night he felt very good about how things were turning out. He felt his tests had gone well and that boded well for his future plans as an Auror. His relationship with Ginny was on a solid footing. Actually, he was madly in love with the girl and he was pretty sure she felt the same way about him. He was a little concerned about Abigail, but now that the Headmistress was aware of the situation she would be in good hands. And he was quite pleased with how his plans for helping the wizarding community at large were panning out. The two original shops that he helped get reopened were doing very well and Angelina was a week away from the grand reopening of the ice cream shop. An article had appeared in the Daily Prophet about the mystery investor who was helping revitalize Diagon Alley with guesses at who was responsible. They weren't even close.

Kreacher woke Harry up in time for breakfast. He wanted to be there when Ginny took Abigail up to the Head's office. As he watched those two special girls walk out of the Hall hand in hand Harry had a flash of his own, about a special red head walking with a young girl with dark hair she had inherited from her father, him. It brought a smile to his face.

“Penny for your thoughts, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, no, Hermione. These thoughts are worth far more than a penny.”

When he told her, she had to agree. It was nearly lunch time before Ginny and Abigail returned to the Great Hall. Harry and Hermione had stayed there, discussing plans for the summer until they got their

test scores and knew if their applications to the Ministry were accepted. Hermione intended to go to work in the Magical Creatures department to work on better conditions for the so called 'lesser' magical species. When they came through the entrance Abigail was looking very thoughtful. Ginny was giving nothing away and she walked the young Ravenclaw past them and down to her spot at the table. She stayed with her, talking quietly for a few moments and then after getting a hug, walked back up to take her usual spot next to Harry.

"So? What happened?" Harry asked anxiously.

"She was asked a lot of questions by Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore from his portrait. That kind of spooked her, but he was so calm and gentle about it she settled down and found it easier to answer. Some of the other portraits also asked her some questions. There was a lot of conversation about her parents, grandparents, things like that. She didn't know much past her grandparents but she said she'd check. I think they suspect she might be related to a Seer like Professor Trelawney is but with a genuine gift. Professor McGonagall asked her to keep a journal this summer and to record anything she 'sees in her head'. She's also to take an owl home with her so she can stay in touch. McGonagall wants us to communicate with her as well. She's very impressed with the bond that you've developed and she thinks it will help. Apparently Abigail has had these visions for as long as she can remember but never said anything because she was afraid it would make her 'different'."

Ginny looked at Harry and took his hand,

"She said she never really felt like she belonged until you told her about being part of the wizarding family. I'd swear that McGonagall is having second thoughts about you becoming an Auror instead of staying here to teach. You better be careful, my dear, I think she's planning on kidnapping you," the last being said with a smile.

Harry smiled back. It was nice he was wanted.

Harry's Future, Part 5

The last week of school at Hogwarts was a bit of a mixed bag. First through fourth and sixth years were taking exams while the fifth and sevenths were allowed to decompress after their week of testing for their OWLs and NEWTs. Harry got a partial break since he still had to administer the exam for his two sessions of first years but otherwise he was free to sleep in or go broom riding with Ginny or just hang out on the lawn and soak up the June sunshine. Since first year Defense Against the Dark Arts was primarily a theory course, he and Bill had put together an extensive exam in three parts. The first was to identify creatures commonly associated with the arts from pictures numbered and hung about the classroom. The second was a multiple choice format that had the students identifying curses based on a written description. The last was an essay asking the students to give their thoughts and opinions on the role of the Dark Arts in Magical history. While this may have seemed like a cross over into Professor Binn's History of Magic class Harry had spent a fair amount of time discussing what impact the Dark Arts had on Magical society down through the centuries.

He fully expected the students to do very well on the first section, since as part of his review that had started a month before he devised a game of sorts. The pictures were posted about the classroom and then Harry turned out all the lights. He would then use his wand to light up a particular picture and students would then shout out what the creature was. They enjoyed this enormously and by the time the exam rolled around everyone in the class could identify even the most obscure creature.

And then it was done. After nearly eight long years, his education at Hogwarts was completed, including as Professor McGonagall had put it a year ago, his year of extensive research in the field. He knew he was going to miss Hogwarts tremendously and he was sorely tempted to take the Headmistress up on her offer to stay on, but he knew he had other work to do just now.

So it was on the night of the last dinner he would ever have as a student at Hogwarts he walked into the Great Hall with Ginny and Hermione with a mixture of sadness and joy, leavened with a healthy

dose of satisfaction for a job well done. The Hall was filled with light and the ceiling reflected the dim glow of the setting sun outside.

He looked up to see all the faculty seated at the table on the raised dais, wondering if indeed he would one day sit up there himself. Bill Weasley caught his eye and gave him a wink and raised his goblet in a silent salute. Professor McGonagall stood up and signaled for silence.

“One and all, thank you for bringing us to the successful close of a great year. One might say the first year of a new era. Please enjoy your meal but remain when you are done for we have some announcements to close the evening.”

The dinner that appeared was every bit as sumptuous as the welcoming feast and Harry recognized so many favorites he didn't know where to begin. The conversation that filled the room was lighthearted and often punctuated with laughter. Harry had to smile because too often in the past the final dinner had been a somber affair. As he was polishing off his second helping of dessert the Headmistress came to stand behind the podium and gaveled for quiet.

“Let me start by saying that was a very fine meal and my thanks to the kitchen staff for providing it to us.”

This prompted a round of applause. Hermione said,

“That's the first time I've ever heard anyone even mention the 'staff' down in the kitchen. Maybe there's hope after all.”

“I am pleased to announce that for the first time in a number of years we will have the benefit of a returning Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Professor Weasley has agreed to return next year to continue his fine work.”

This provoked a bigger round of applause as Bill had proven to be a very popular teacher based on his knowledge, experience and his definite 'cool' factor. He gave a short wave and a big smile to the students.

“Sadly, however, Professor Weasley will be deprived of his most able assistant, Mr. Potter. I don’t suppose that you could be persuaded to return to us, Harry?” she asked.

More applause broke out and Harry could see all his first years standing up on their benches waving and cheering. He began to get a little red and misty eyed but he still had to shrug and shake his head in the negative.

“Yes, well, I didn’t mean to put you on the spot, Mr. Potter. I understand your plan and your reasons, but know you will be missed and you are welcome back anytime.”

The Head cleared her throat and looked down at her notes and then said,

“It now comes time for us to announce the awards for the year. Firstly, congratulations to Gryffindor house for winning the Quidditch Cup.”

This announcement was interrupted by a loud burst of cheering from the Gryffindor table and polite applause from the other houses.

“Yes, well done Gryffindor. We also have a new award we would like to bestow. This is something that the faculty and board of governors have discussed over the years and we have finally decided that this was the year to begin. As the Quidditch cup is awarded to the house with the best performing Quidditch team and the House cup for best overall performance, it was decided that a similar award should be provided for best overall academic performance. The inaugural award goes to Ravenclaw for their superior achievement through the year. Congratulations.”

Professor McGonagall waited while the applause for this award died down.

“As for the house cup, congratulations are once more in store for Gryffindor for their superior overall performance this year. Yes, well done, you. I would like to add that all the houses this year have done magnificently with your hard work and good spirits in helping us begin to move forward after such difficult times. As you are aware, a

number of us were not able to take part in this rebirth as they made the ultimate sacrifice to preserve what is good and right about the magical world. In recognition of that sacrifice a large plaque bearing each name has been placed in the trophy hall. I'd ask that each of you try and take a look at it and remember those friends and family so noted."

She paused and let her eyes sweep across the room, then they came back to rest on the senior end of the Gryffindor table.

"As you know, every now and again a student or group of students goes above and beyond to provide some service to the school. They would be presented with a "Special Award for Service to the School". Tonight we will award several. Only one of the individual recipients is with us tonight but the other two will receive them nonetheless. Miss Hermione Jean Granger, will you stand please?"

Blushing to the roots of her bushy hair Hermione stood up and turned to face the Head.

"For your outstanding performance in contributing to the downfall of the darkest wizard of modern times, you are presented with a Special Award. Please come forward and accept this scroll."

Trying in vain to hide her embarrassment Hermione walked the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables to loud applause and came to a stop in front of the dais. Professor McGonagall handed down the parchment scroll to Hermione with a smile,

"Thank you, Miss Granger, for all you've done here at Hogwarts. I expect very big things from you in the future."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione replied quietly.

"The other two recipients are Mr. Ronald Weasley and Mr. Neville Longbottom."

Hermione smiled as she walked back to her seat holding her scroll tightly.

“The next is a group award. It is presented to those students known collectively as Dumbledore’s Army or the DA. Their efforts during the previous year to thwart the goals of Voldemort’s confederates in undermining the traditions of this institution were invaluable and their contribution to the final battle beyond measure. As the remaining two members here tonight would Miss Luna Lovegood and Miss Genevra Molly Weasley please come forward and accept this award on behalf of the entire DA?”

Once again the applause was loud and long as the two seventh years made their way to the dais. Professor McGonagall handed two copies of the scroll to the girls who then turned and hugged each other.

“Thank you, ladies, you and your schoolmates risked so much every day during that dark period. Your courage is an inspiration to us all.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” they replied in unison and then walked back to their tables.

“Now there may be some of you wondering why we didn’t include the leader of that particular band of students in that award.”

“Oh, bloody hell, here it comes,” Harry muttered to himself.

Ginny gave him a nudge while Hermione mock scowled at him.

“As any surviving member of Dumbledore’s Army will tell you, I asked a lot of questions of them to find out just how this amazing chapter of Hogwarts History unfolded. What I found out was a truly amazing and inspiring story. It is a story of selflessness, dedication, perseverance and above all courage. This holds true of all the members, but none more so than its leader and teacher, for he was both of those and more. This young man came to us barely aware of his heritage and completely unaware of his fate. He rose to every occasion and never turned away from what he saw as his ultimate responsibility, even when that meant what seemed like certain death. His work here this year has been an inspiration to us all and hopefully a good omen for times to come somewhere in the future. In recognition of these accomplishments and many more I haven’t mentioned, I’m pleased to announce the first ever ‘Extraordinary Award for Services to the

School' to Mr. Harry James Potter. Will you please come forward and accept this scroll, Mr. Potter."

It took a moment for Harry to get up from the bench, partly from his own reluctance and partly from the weight of Ginny hanging onto his neck. He finally was able to begin his walk down the aisle to the thunderous standing ovation from the students, faculty and surprisingly to a large group of house elves at the rear entrance and all the castle ghosts hovering above their house tables. The Head indicated that Harry should come up onto the dais and as she handed him the scroll bound with a golden ribbon she took him into her arms and gave him a hug.

"Thank you, Harry. Thank you for everything. These halls won't see another wizard like you again in a long time, perhaps ever. Please come back to us often."

"Thank you, Professor," was all Harry could get out.

He turned and shook hands with the entire faculty. Then he went to make his way down the stairs but he was intercepted by the Head.

"Harry, after we're finished here, Professor Dumbledore wishes for you to come see him. He'd like to take his leave of you this evening."

"Yes, ma'am."

As he began to walk he noticed Abigail Westwood standing on her bench applauding with the rest of the first years. He walked over to her and gave her a hug. Then he went back to his seat at the table. He motioned with his hands for everyone to sit back down and after a few moments they did. Ginny reached over and gave him brief but heartfelt kiss.

"I told you. You aren't just my hero."

He gave her one of his crooked smiles.

Professor McGonagall gaveled once more and then said,

“And another year comes to a close. Good evening to all and have a safe trip home.”

After another round of applause the students began to file out of the hall. Harry chose to remain seated and let the others pass. He wanted to take a look at the Hall empty. Ginny and Hermione stayed with him. As the last of the students filed out he lifted his eyes to the ceiling and saw the night sky bright with summer stars.

“And so it ends,” he said under his breath but loud enough for Ginny to hear.

“But something new begins, my love,” she said.

He simply nodded and took hold of her hand and led her out of the Hall with Hermione on his other side.

The first two weeks of summer at the Burrow were quiet, nearly idyllic, and Harry was thoroughly enjoying himself. His NEWT results weren't due until the end of July but Mr. Weasley and Percy both told him that the buzz about the Ministry was his combined results were amongst the highest in memory for anyone associated with the testing. He had received two messages in the first week from professional Quidditch teams inviting him to try out. He politely responded thanking them for their interest but that he had other plans for his future. Ginny's first try out was scheduled for the third week of vacation and it was with the Holyhead Harpies. Since Holyhead was on the far coast of Wales, Harry and Ginny would take the Knight bus. Harry had found a case that would hold Ginny's broom to protect it from the likely bouncing around that would take place on the unpredictable triple-decker bus.

Harry had already taken a trip to Diagon Alley to visit the reopened ice cream shop, renamed Angelina's Ice Cream Haven. While there, he of course had to pay a visit to the main store of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes which was doing a nice steady business. Ron's idea of concentrating on low cost low margin novelty and joke items had paid off handsomely and the store had built up a substantial customer base. He also took the time to stroll by the two shops that he had

helped reopen and all appeared to be going well. He also paid a visit to the wizard bank, Gringotts, to get an update on his account.

“Welcome, Mr. Potter,” said the same elderly appearing goblin as last time. “We are honored and pleased with your visit. How may we be of assistance?”

“I’d like to make a withdrawal and to have a look at my account, please,” Harry replied.

“Certainly, sir. Please, come this way.”

Harry was led to the same private room as before and a goblin clerk entered with a large account book.

“As you can see, sir, there has been growth as a result of the investments left to you as part of the Black legacy. This has been offset somewhat by the expenditure associated with your gift to the Weasley family by way of payment to the Marvel Wizard Home Remodeling Company. In addition, the two shops in Diagon Alley are well on their way to repaying your initial investment and the new ice cream shop has made their first payment. In addition, a lump sum payment from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes was made in the amount of five hundred galleons last week. I understand this was payment on an investment made before Gringotts became involved in your business affairs, sir.”

“That’s right. I used the prize from the TriWizard Tournament to help them get started.”

“Sir is proving to be quite an astute judge of investments.”

Harry smiled and shrugged a bit. He knew his reasons were far different then what the Goblin might have presumed.

“Overall, sir, you can see your total assets have increased over last year.”

“Yes, I can. Thank you. I’d like to make a withdrawal of fifty galleons today, please.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Harry removed the small leather bag that he had been given last year when he visited the bank and laid it on the table. A different Goblin clerk came in with a withdrawal slip and a cloth bag of coins. He counted the coins out on the table, and when Harry nodded, he filled the leather bag and handed it back to Harry with a slight bow.

“I also thought to show you this, sir,” the older goblin began. “It is an accounting of the contributions made to the Ministry relief fund based on your business dealings. We have had word from the Ministry that they are nearly at an end of the program and I was wondering what sir had in mind for the future, if anything?”

“Once the Ministry ends its relief effort, we’ll set up a fund of our own to provide financial assistance to cover the costs associated with attending Hogwarts for students who are in need. We’ll have to figure out how to know who qualifies but I’d guess we have a little time,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“One believes that the Hogwarts administration knows much about the young witches and wizards they accept to attend. We will make discreet inquiries on your behalf, anonymously of course, and inform you of what we discover.”

“Thank you, I appreciate all you’ve been doing for me this past year,” Harry replied as he stood up.

“Oh, no, sir. It is the bank’s pleasure to be a part of your efforts on behalf of the wizarding world. One would hope that your efforts to heal the wounds of the past may be felt beyond just the human community, however,” the goblin said meaningfully.

“I know what you mean and I think I’m safe in saying that a very forceful voice is about to be heard at the Ministry of Magic saying much the same thing.”

“Then it is a time of great hope, sir.”

“Um, by the way,” Harry said. “I don’t know your name.”

“Ah, so kind of you to ask, Mr. Potter. I am called Kandak, sir, and I am at your service.”

“Thanks again, Kandak” and Harry reached out to shake the goblins hand.

Hiding his surprise the elder goblin took Harry’s hand in his, the long talon like fingers nearly wrapping all the way around. Harry smiled and they walked out of the room. With a small wave Harry made his way to the banks double doors as the two goblins watched him leave.

“A time of hope, perhaps, after all,” Kandak said to no one in particular.

The morning they were due to go to Holyhead dawned overcast and drizzly. Harry was very happy that they had decided to go by bus instead of flying by broom. Their plan was to take the Knight bus as a way to add some fun to their trip. Mrs. Weasley had given them all kinds of advice and warnings before they left but they were still in a good mood. Harry had no worries, after all he had been through, even a trip to Wales on the Knight bus posed little concern.

Harry held out his hand to summon the bus and in an instant it was skidding to a halt in front of them. Harry could see that Ernie Prang was still driving but the conductor was a new wizard, as Stan Shunpike’s being a Death Eater made him no longer suitable for the job.

“Welcome aboard young ‘un’s. That’ll be eleven sickles each and where be ya headed this gloomy day?”

“The Holyhead Harpies Quidditch stadium, please,” Harry said as he handed over on Galleon and five sickles.

“Right you are...’cor blimey, you’re Harry Potter, ain’t ya,” the conductor said.

“That’s right,” Harry replied as he helped Ginny up the bus steps with her broom bag.

“Ernie, we got Harry Potter on the bus.”

“Ain’t the first time,” the old bus driver replied.

“Well, this is something indeed. The name is Henry, Henry Hugglebottom, Mr. Potter and we’ll have you to Holyhead in next to no time.”

Harry gave a little smile and he and Ginny found seats at the back of the first floor of the triple-decker bus. With a bang, the bus leaped back to its original route and deposited an elderly couple in Portsmouth before speeding off on its magical path to Wales. The big purple bus, possessed of the same magic as the ministry cars, zigged and zagged its way on lane and motorway without concern for traffic or impediments. It did so with a manic energy unlike the smoothness of the Ministry vehicles which may simply have been a reflection of the driver more than anything else. ‘Barely next to no time’ was indeed a two hour drive punctuated with sudden dislocations as they picked up three more passengers before they were deftly deposited on the sidewalk outside of the stadium entrance.

“Enjoy your stay, Mr. Potter. You two have a wundaful day.”

Again Harry smiled and waved, then hefted Ginny’s broom bag on his shoulder and took her hand. He could feel Ginny take in a deep breath.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I am,” she replied.

“Well, think of it this way, it can’t be worse then when we went into the Ministry building that time.”

“Your right and I wasn’t nervous that time,” she said.

“You weren’t?” Harry said a bit surprised.

“No, I was scared to death.”

Harry laughed as the two of them made their way to the door marked Team Manager.

“Ms. Hapnafl said in her letter that I should stop at the Team Manager’s office first, Harry.”

Ginny walked up and knocked on the door. She listened for a response but didn’t get one. She knocked harder and then heard a call from further down the tunnel that led to the pitch proper.

“Who’s banging on my door down there,” a raspy female voice called out.

“It’s Ginny Weasley, I’m here for my try out?” she called out a bit tentatively.

“Ah, Ms. Weasley. Yes, we were just getting ready for you. Come this way, please.”

Harry and Ginny walked down the tunnel towards the sound of the voice. Harry could see that the stadium was of stone construction unlike the wood that was prevalent at Hogwarts. As they came out of the tunnel Harry could see that it was the same size as the playing field at school but it lacked the VIP seating towers, which he didn’t mind at all. He could see several flyers already in the air and a group standing off to one side. A middle aged witch in flying robes watched as Ginny and Harry approached.

“Ms. Weasley, I presume. I’m Betty Hapnafl, the Manager of the Holyhead Harpies. I’ve heard some very good things about you. Thank you for coming today...” her voice trailed off as she shifted her glance towards Harry.

Harry returned her gaze calmly with just a hint of a grin. Her eyes began to grow wide and beyond her shoulder Harry could see the

women that were standing together looking in his direction now and nudging and pointing.

“You’re him, aren’t you? You’re Harry Potter.”

“Yes, ma’am, I am and it’s very nice to me you, Ms. Hapnafl. Perhaps I should go wait outside. I think I might be a distraction.”

“No, no. Please, Mr. Potter. We’d be honored if you’d stay. I just didn’t realize that you and Ms. Weasley were, well...”

“Yes, we are. Alright, if you think so, I’ll find a place in the stands and stay out of the way. Good luck, Ginny.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Ginny said with a smile.

Harry made his way up the nearest set of stairs and found a spot that allowed a good view of the entire pitch. He settled down and watched some of the Harpies practicing. It was obvious that they were excellent flyers but he didn’t think they were any better than Ginny, but he might have been a bit biased in his appraisal. After a few moments he saw a very familiar red headed blur take to the sky. As she always did before a practice session she took a couple of high speed laps around the pitch to loosen up. Once she was ready she went through a series of maneuvers as directed by Ms. Hapnafl. Then several other flyers took to their brooms and ran Ginny through a number of drills exchanging the quaffle, dodging a bludger and scoring attacks.

Harry could see that Ginny was more than holding her own and in several instances had clearly out flown the Harpies working with her. It was clear that all the hours that Kreacher had spent putting Ginny and the other Gryffindor flyers through their paces had paid off. When she was finally signaled to land it was clear to Harry that she had had a very good day. Harry watched as she talked with the manager and some of the other flyers. After a few minutes she waved frantically at Harry to come down. He made his way down onto the field and walked over to the group of women.

“Harry, Ms. Hapnafl was happy with my performance but they have other girls to see first. They said they would let me know in a few days. Um, they have a favor to ask of you though,” Ginny said a bit breathlessly.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“Mr. Potter,” Ms. Hapnafl said. “We’ve heard some amazing things about your flying at Hogwarts. We were wondering if you could demonstrate something for us if you would.”

“If I can, but I don’t have my broom here. A lot of what I can do is based on the Firebolt.”

Ginny made a rather rude noise and said,

“Harry, please, you could fly a tree branch if you had to. Use my Nimbus.”

“Ok, Ginny. What is it you’d like to see, Ms. Hapnafl?”

“We would like to see the Potter bootleg.”

“The what?” Harry said in surprise.

“That’s what they are calling your reverse direction dive, Harry. You know the one in the first match last year?” Ginny told him.

“Oh, yeah, ok.”

Harry took Ginny’s broom and took off and made a slow circuit of the pitch to get the feel of the Nimbus 2001 again. He kicked up the speed and did a few looping rolls and once he felt comfortable again he took the broom out past the far goals then pulled it into a tight turn and came back at full bore. He shot past the crowd on the ground and then pushed the nose down, yanked hard to the left and then pushed the image of the maneuver to the broom itself. In an instant he was facing the other direction and in a shallow dive toward the center of the pitch. He pulled the broom up and took another circuit of

the pitch and then came in for a landing. The assembled flyers were applauding enthusiastically.

“That was amazing, Mr. Potter. How do you manage to keep the broom from skidding on such an abrupt change in direction?”

“First of all, Ms. Hapnafl, it’s Harry and secondly I’m not sure that I can explain it exactly. The physical part is easy. I push the nose down and pull hard to the left. The mental part gets a bit tricky. I just sort of form a picture in my mind and push it out to the broom,” he said with a shrug.

The amazed manager was shocked at Harry’s nonchalant response. She looked over at Ginny clearly seeking some elaboration.

“Sorry, he’s like this all the time. Does something so bloody amazing you’re picking your jaw up off the floor and he just shrugs it off. Drives me crazy.”

“Well, Harry if you ever figure out a way to explain it, I know about a thousand Quidditch flyers that would pay big money to learn how.”

“Thanks,” he laughed. “I’ll see what I can come up with.”

“As for you, Ms. Weasley, as I said, that was some excellent work. We’ll be in touch in the next week or so. Thank you for coming today.”

“No, thank you, ma’am,” Ginny replied.

In the background there were some murmurs from the assembled Harpies. Finally one stepped forward, a tallish dark skinned woman perhaps ten years Harry’s senior.

“Um, excuse me, Mr. Potter, but, ah, would you mind giving us your autograph?” she said.

“You want my autograph?” he replied somewhat flustered.

“Yes, please, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“Um, well, no, I guess not. I don’t have anything to write with or on though.”

“No worries,” she replied with a grin.

She turned and waved at one of the other players who produced a small notebook and a muggle marker pen and brought it over. The rest of the team followed and Harry began to sign on pages of the notebook that were then torn out and handed to who he was signing for. He asked each of the women their names and he added a little message such as ‘good luck’ or ‘fly high’. Some of the players asked him questions about his time on the Gryffindor team or what his plans were. Many of them got wide eyed when he mentioned he was waiting to hear if he had been accepted for Auror training. After everyone had received an autograph, including Ms. Hapnafl, he shook hands all around and then he and Ginny headed out of the stadium.

“You did great out there, Ginny. I can’t see why they wouldn’t want you on the team,” Harry said proudly.

“Thanks, Harry. I hope so. It would be great to play here. And you didn’t do so badly out there yourself. No one could believe that you weren’t already playing for one of the top pro teams.”

“You didn’t say anything about me turning down those two teams that wrote to me, did you?” he asked.

“No, I just said that you were considering options. But you let the kneazle out of the bag. They looked very surprised that you’d rather be an Auror than a flyer.”

He just nodded and shrugged and Ginny just smiled and rolled her eyes. Once more they found themselves on the Knight bus and the ride home was every bit as maniacal as the trip out. By the time the other stops and pick ups were made it was nearly sundown when they were deposited outside the Burrow. As the bus disappeared down the dusty road Harry took a moment to look at the house.

In outward appearance it didn't look all that different from before but to someone as familiar with it as Harry he could see significant changes. The magical home remodelers had done a tremendous job in matching the exterior of the new parts to that of the old. They had pushed the house out on the back and far sides and gone up to meet the original third storey. Mrs. Weasley now had a much bigger kitchen with a separate dinning room, a living room that would comfortably seat the entire extended family with room to accommodate future additions. Guest rooms were added on the second and third floors and additional bathrooms were likewise added.

Construction had been completed before the end of term so when Harry and Ginny came home they were treated to a full blown graduation party that included the Grangers as well and did double duty as a house warming of sorts. Mrs. Weasley couldn't step into her new kitchen without tears for a full week afterward. Mr. Weasley was hardly to be seen as he spent almost all his free time in his new shop. It had two garage bays, yards of worktable surface, storage cabinets, tools and a second floor attic for additional storage. Ginny noticed how Harry was running his eyes over the whole yard. She put both her arms around him and said,

"It's a wonderful thing you've done here, love. I know Mum kept saying they didn't need all that room, but after all those years being cramped in the old Burrow, this is like a dream come true for her and Dad."

Harry put his arm around her shoulder and said,

"I'm only too glad to do it for them, you all, really. And it's a lot less than they deserve. Come on, I'm starved. Let's see what Mum's whipped up in the new kitchen."

She laughed and they made their way to their 'home' still holding tight to one another. When they got inside they were descended upon by Ginny's parents, Ron who was there for dinner and Bill and Fleur who were there for a farewell dinner of sorts before they left to spend a few weeks with Fleur's family in France. They peppered Ginny with questions about her try out then turned to get Harry's opinion of how well she had done. He enthusiastically recounted how great she had

flown, her terrific ball handling and how at ease she seemed amongst the professionals. In typical fashion he showed no signs of mentioning his part in the days activities so Ginny just shrugged and chimed in with her retelling of his demo of the Potter bootleg and the autograph session.

“Blimey, Harry. First a broom named after you and now your own maneuver? You’re going to be the most famous nonflying Quidditch flyer ever,” Ron said, amazed.

“All a bit embarrassing, actually,” Harry replied.

Ron rolled his eyes as Ginny gave Harry one of her best disgusted looks. Everyone else laughed and Fleur gave Harry one of her brightest smiles. Mr. Weasley reached into the pocket of his robe and handed Harry a scroll.

“Kingsley asked me to give this to you, Harry.”

“Thanks, I hope this is what I think it is.”

He unrolled the scroll and read it, a slow smile spreading across his face. He looked up at this family.

“Three Outstandings and three Exceeds Expectations. And my acceptance to Auror training pending passing the entry tests.”

“What were the Outstandings in Harry?” Ron asked.

“Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration,” he replied.

“I bet Professor McGonagall will love to hear that, Harry.”

He nodded and was about to say something when Mrs. Weasley took out a small roll of parchment and handed it to Harry.

“This came for you by owl a little while ago, Harry.”

He took the smaller roll and unfurled it.

"It's from Abigail Westwood. She says to tell Ginny congratulations on her terrific flying today with the Harpies. She also said I did a good job as well," he said with a small smile.

The smile faded as he read the rest of the note to himself. It didn't go unnoticed.

"What ees eet, 'arry? What does she say that makes you un'appy?" Fleur asked, her voice full of concern.

"Hmm, oh, nothing really, just something between a student and former teacher."

Fleur's eyes hardened. Ginny laid a hand on Harry's arm.

"No secrets, remember?" she said softly.

"Ok, she told me to be careful when I report for training. She 'saw' men talking and some of them were upset about the 'great Potter' coming to be an Auror and he'd regret not becoming a Quidditch player or a school teacher."

He looked up from the parchment and saw the reactions on the faces of his family. To say the ladies were as mad as wet hens would be an understatement. Some very unladylike comments were being made and the worst were being made in French. Bill and Ron looked concerned and Mr. Weasley looked embarrassed. He was the one that finally called for some order.

"Alright you lot, settle down please, settle down. Harry," he began turning to look at his 'adopted' son, "I'm sorry to say that what your student warned you of is not far from the mark. There have been some rumors and overheard mutterings at the Ministry. When Kingsley handed me the scroll today we had a little discussion. He's really rather upset and greatly conflicted. On the one hand he believes you'll be a tremendous asset as an Auror both in fighting the Dark Arts as well as helping reestablish the Ministry as a worthwhile part of the Magic community. On the other hand, if someone does

something stupid and you get hurt or worse it could bring the whole organization down. We weren't sure if we should warn you about specifics or just suggest you be careful all things considered. But the kneazel is out of the bag now so here we are."

Harry looked about the room at the faces of his family. Once again stupid people thinking stupid thoughts were causing them anxiety and pain. He could feel the anger begin to well up inside him. It wasn't the cold rage that had affected him when he confronted the would-be burglars just before Christmas but it lit a fire in his belly that wasn't likely to go out anytime soon.

"Thanks, Dad. Don't worry, don't anyone worry. What's that saying, forewarned is forearmed. I'll be careful and keep my eyes open."

He even managed a fairly convincing smile of sorts. What he was thinking was a bit different. Whoever was planning to cause him trouble had better be prepared to deal with the consequences, for there would be consequences.

The message from the Ministry had indicated that Harry's entry interview would be held on Monday morning of the following week promptly at nine o'clock. And so it was that at the appointed hour Harry was ushered into the office of the Director of Magical Law Enforcement. Behind his desk was the Director, a hard faced wizard with cold blue eyes, several scars and half his left ear missing. But compared to Mad Eye Moody he was a movie star. Two younger but similar looking wizards sat to either side of the desk. The Director spoke first,

"Well, Mr. Potter, it seems you've created quite a stir with your application. Just about the highest NEWTs any of us can remember and of course your past experiences have a lot of tongues wagging," he said with a bit of a scowl and then leaned forward with his hands clasped on the desk.

"Understand that that doesn't mean anything. The NEWTs may get you in the door but what happens from here on in determines whether or not you can stay. As for the exploits in the past, that might not

mean anything either. Luck or nothing more than the work of a gifted amateur. Am I making myself clear, Potter?"

"Very clear, sir," Harry replied, his voice even. The anger that he had felt when he first got Abigail's message had settled into a kind of cold resolve. He would consider everything they threw his way as a kind of test. His eyes never left the face of the Director.

The wizard to the Director's right cleared his throat and with a nod from his boss began to speak,

"My name is Flakhorn, Potter and I'm responsible for Auror training. I understand what the Director is saying but I think it would be worthwhile to hear your side of the story."

Flakhorn's expression gave nothing away. Harry couldn't tell if he was attempting to support Harry or was giving him rope to hang himself with. He took a breath and began, appropriately enough, from the beginning. In a calm level voice he related what he knew of his first encounter with Voldemort as a toddler and then gave an account of his various adventures that involved dealing with aspects of the dark arts. The three wizards sat back in their chairs and listened, their expressions never changed. The only indication of any reaction was a very occasional glance exchanged between them. Harry talked for well over an hour, finishing with the final fight and the fall of Voldemort. He told everything he could recall, freely admitting his mistakes and acknowledging the many times he received help from others.

"There was nothing after that last fight, Potter? What about your teaching?"

Without preamble Harry discussed his work with Bill Weasley and his efforts with the first years and his lectures for the more senior students.

"What about your NEWTs, Potter? What did you think of those?" Flakhorn asked.

"I thought they were extremely challenging but the faculty at Hogwarts did a great job preparing me for them. The results speak for themselves," he replied giving the man a calm direct look.

The third wizard, who had remained silent until now spoke up.

"Explain to us why you want to be an Auror, Potter. I'm given to understand that you have been offered a post at Hogwarts and that you could easily be flying professionally right now for any of several different Quidditch clubs. Why take the hard way?" The man spoke with a low, gravelly voice.

"The right way is often the hard way, sir. And this feels right. I could try to give you a long, complicated reason but basically it just feels right."

The third wizard offered no reply. The Director then said,

"Alright, Potter. Report to room three down the hall. I trust you have your wand? Yes? Good. Off you go."

Harry stood and seeing that none of the three did likewise he simply turned and left the room. The rest of the day followed the same pattern. Whomever he reported to offered no enthusiasm or outright objection to his presence. Any task he performed as directed was noted but no indication given as to result. By the end of the day he was willing to concede that the ghosts at Hogwarts showed more 'life' than the Auror staff that he had met so far. It was around five in the afternoon when he was told he was done for the day and he was to report back at nine the next morning. He thanked the last examiner and made his way to the lobby to Apparate back to the Burrow. He was aware of looks but at least there weren't any whispered commentary. In the blink of an eye he was standing in the yard outside the Burrow's kitchen door. It was overcast and the promise of evening rain was heavy in the air. As he stepped through the door he encountered Mrs. Weasley working at the new stove.

"Harry, dear. We've been waiting for you. Tell us, how did it go?"

'Us' turned out to be herself, Ginny and Ron. Ginny hurried to his side and gave him a warm kiss on the cheek and led him to a chair at the kitchen table.

"Yeah, mate, tell us. Did anyone try to mess you about?"

Taking Ginny's hand in his Harry looked at his best friend.

"I'm not sure, Ron. I won't say they were polite but they weren't openly hostile either. Very cold, very correct. They asked questions and I answered them. They told me to do something and I did it. They never gave a hint if I was doing it right or if the answers were good or not. I was told to come back tomorrow so I guess that's good."

He shrugged.

"You know, Harry, that sounds kind of strange. I remember talking to Tonks once about Auror training," Ginny said. "She said the first days were really tough. Throwing questions at you really fast and sometimes several at the same time. Yelling while you were trying to do a spell or defend against one. Always trying to trip you up."

"That's more like what I was expecting. Maybe they're trying to find something out about me. Don't know." As he said this his stomach rumbled loudly. He laughed as he said, "The one thing they didn't do was feed me. I'm starving."

Mrs. Weasley scowled and shook her head. She went back to the stove and then brought over a plate that contained warm rolls and a crock of butter.

"Tuck into that, Harry. Dinner will be in a few minutes. It will be just the four of us. Arthur is staying late, got a message around noon that he had a meeting this afternoon that would take some time."

With a flick of her wand, Mrs. Weasley sent four sets of plates and silverware floating to the table, followed by cups and napkins. Harry had always admired the casual efficiency of Mrs. Weasley's wand work. The constant use on everyday chores had made the wand an

extension of herself. It was no surprise to him then that she was able to outduel Bellatrix Lestrange.

The meal passed relatively calmly. Ron talked about how things were going with the stores. He and George had decided to close the store in Hogsmeade for the summer since there was almost no business with the students gone and the store in Diagon Alley was doing a very brisk business. Ginny was still waiting to hear from the Harpies. If things didn't work out with them, she had tentative tryouts for reserve teams for both the Chudley Cannons and Puddlemere United in the following weeks. Harry made it an early night and was asleep when Mr. Weasley got home.

The two days that followed were much the same as the first. The only difference was that on the second day there was no interview, just more testing of magical ability and knowledge again with no indication of successes or failures. On the third day he concluded with an exit interview of sorts. The Director and his two associates once more met with Harry in the Director's office. The three sat poker faced and silent as did Harry.

"Well, Mr. Potter," the Director finally began. "According to the examiners, you've done admirably. Your command of magic is well above what we might expect from a recent graduate. However there is an issue which has caused some concern."

"And that is?" Harry asked.

"Your complete lack of any emotional response during the last three days. Many of the exercises you have been put through were specifically designed to prompt a response beyond just the task at hand. Fear, anger, frustration. Yet you have shown no response whatsoever. Frankly, it makes us wonder about your emotional and mental state."

Harry looked at the Director and then at each of the other two men and then back at the Director. First he smiled, and then he began to laugh quietly. The three men looked at once perplexed and annoyed. The Director spoke.

“And just what do you find so funny, Potter?”

“The whole business really. Let me see if I’ve got this right. The famous Harry Potter has the nerve to aspire to be an Auror. He gets the highest NEWT results that anyone can remember even though some of the tests were deliberately altered to make them even tougher. Even the process of the last three days was changed just for him to see if he’d crack. But he didn’t and now you wonder if he’s some kind of madman?”

Their faces still didn’t betray anything but there was the slight shifting in the chair and the tightening of clasped hands to give away that he wasn’t far off the mark.

“Let me see if I can explain. I was raised by a family that thought less of me than they did their car or their refrigerator. So not being acknowledged for a job well done is something I’m very familiar with. And I’ve been through enough harrowing, life threatening situations, thank you very much, that your tests weren’t much more than practical exercises. And lastly, I’m well aware that there are those in the Ministry who don’t like the idea of me becoming an Auror and would love to be able to point to some outburst or meltdown as a reason I’m unfit so I’ll be damned if I’ll give them the satisfaction. As was pointed out before, sir, I have other options but this is what I want to do. To be an Auror and work against the dark side of our world. But if I can’t become an Auror I will find another way. The choice is yours, of course.”

The Director kept his eyes locked on Harry for a moment longer then nodded once.

“Very well, Potter. You’ll report back here Monday, week after next to begin your training. You may be something different but you’ll get no special treatment. Around here you’re just like everyone else. Understand?”

Harry nodded once and said,

“I understand perfectly, Director.”

What he didn't say was that he was looking forward to being treated like everyone else for the first time in his life."

Harry's Future, Part 6

Harry sat at the kitchen table finishing up the last bits of his birthday breakfast. It was the Sunday before his twentieth birthday but since he was still in Auror training the celebration was to be early since the only day off you got from the Aurors was for a funeral, your own. Training had begun just after Harry's nineteenth birthday and as promised it was tough and no special consideration was given, which suited him just fine.

The first six months had been primarily given over to grueling physical training to increase stamina and toughness. Harry had never been a particularly robust physical specimen but he had developed a toughness of mind and will that kept him going even when his body was screaming for him to stop. There was also some classroom work to break up the workout sessions and consisted of memorization of the laws of the wizard world, laws of the muggle world that might impact on magical folk and the roll of Aurors in enforcing those laws. There were four other candidates in Harry's training section as it was called. One was a Ravenclaw girl, or young lady, that Harry remembered from his seventh year classes. Two were young men who graduated from the tumultuous Dark Days seventh year. They were part of the students that the Ministry had scavenged through looking for replacements for the turncoats that had been flushed out of the Ministry just after Voldemort had fallen. Their grades had not quite merited acceptance for Auror training but they were given a year to 'prep' and were being given a chance to qualify. The last was an older man in his mid twenties who apparently had the grades but chose not to apply at a time when the Ministry was not held in very high regard.

The months that followed the end of the physical training period added training in techniques for surveillance, tracking, and disguises. Much of this was conducted by using case studies of investigations both large and small that had been pursued over the years. Special emphasis was given to cases where things had gone wrong and Aurors had been injured or killed. In the last two months, Harry, singled out despite all previous comments to the contrary, had begun to see some activity outside the classroom. While he barely managed to hold his own in the physical training he clearly outshined his

section mates when it came to anything connected with the use of magic or understanding and retaining information connected with the case studies or laws. His ability to use imagery served him very well when it came to disguises. Unlike Tonks, who as a metamorphmagus could alter her features at will, Harry used the *Adfectio* spell to change his features to match the image he formed in his mind. This, coupled with his Invisibility Cloak, made him a natural for surveillance and sting missions. In one instance he was used, in disguise, to buy stolen magical items plundered from the confiscated home of a Death Eater from a fence in Knockturn Alley. This led to the arrest of the fence and three burglars plus the confiscation of a number of artifacts.

So as he finished off his breakfast, Harry was feeling pretty good about how his career choice was shaping up. As he sat back in his chair he felt a light brush across his shoulders and the back of his neck. He looked up to his right into the face that never failed to make his heart skip and his lips turn up in a smile.

“Good morning, birthday boy,” Ginny Weasley said with a wide smile.

She kept a hand on his shoulder as she bent down to place a light warm kiss on his lips.

“Good morning, love. Sleep well?” Harry replied.

“Yes, I did,” she replied as she took a seat at the table next to him. “Yesterday’s match was pretty grueling. If it hadn’t been so close by I don’t think I would have been able to get here by last night. It was nice to sleep in my own bed again.”

Ginny was a rookie chaser for the Holyhead Harpies, an all women Quidditch team that was making a name for itself playing against the usual mixed teams in the UK Premier Quidditch League. Ginny was proving to be a pivotal player on the team. Her lightness of build and natural agility made her very fast and almost supernaturally quick in the air and her long sessions of training with Kreacher the house elf had taken her technique for quaffle handling to a singular level. She was getting a great deal of attention in the Wizarding press and Harry delighted in teasing her about being the ‘famous Ginny Weasley’.

"I'm sorry I was only able to make it to the last few minutes of the match, love. These Saturday morning sessions have been getting more and more frequent lately."

"No need to apologize, Harry. The fact that you've been able to get to any of my matches at all is pretty amazing," Ginny said as she took his hand and pressed it to her cheek, a gesture that Harry had come to find particularly pleasing.

"Isn't it kind of soon for you to be out in the field though, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But maybe they figure with my past experience that I'm somewhat more advanced than the others. Then again it hasn't been anything too big," he said with a shrug.

Their conversation was interrupted by several more members of the Weasley clan entering the kitchen. Bill and Fleur came in through the back door, having just arrived from their home in Cornwall.

"Happy birthday, Harry," Bill called from the doorway.

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said with a smile and laugh.

Fleur swept up to Harry as he rose from his chair and gave him her traditional greeting of a firm hug and kisses on each cheek. She then held him at arms length.

"Happy birthday, mon fere. 'ow are you? We 'aven't seen you een weeks."

"I'm doing fine, Fleur," he said still smiling. "They're working me hard but nothing I can't handle."

Harry, at first taken aback at the intensity of Fleur's concern for his well being, had come to accept her fierce mothering instincts and always did his best to assure her that he was doing well. He suspected that she still had not come to terms with his becoming an Auror. She merely nodded as she looked at him through slightly narrowed eyes. They were interrupted when Ron came stumbling

down the stairs, still half asleep as he had arrived late the night before. George and Angelina Johnson had announced their engagement and Ron had stayed up late celebrating at the Leaky Cauldron. He pulled up short at the foot of the stairs as he saw his sister-in-law standing with Harry. He always found himself tongue tied when he was around the silver haired beauty.

“Good morneeng, Ron,” she said, turning her most dazzling smile on her befuddled brother-in-law. Harry was sure she did it on purpose.

“Oh, uh, yeah...hi, Fleur, Bill,” Ron stammered.

“My God, Ron, you look terrible. What were you doing last night?” Bill asked while trying to suppress laughing.

“Well, with George proposing to Angelina right there in the middle of the ice cream shop, the word spread pretty quick and they’re both pretty popular along Diagon Alley these days so we all ended up at the Cauldron and it turned into quite a party. I think it was after two in the morning by the time I got home. But don’t worry; they both said they’d be here for Harry’s party.”

Everyone was delighted with the idea of the two former schoolmates and Quidditch team members getting married. It helped cement hope that their world was returning to a state of normality after the years of tragedy. Harry and Ginny had yet to make their intentions formal but everyone knew where they were headed. Ron and Hermione were more of a question. Ron was working long hours with the stores and the resurgent owl mail business for Weasleys Wizard Wheezes.

Both stores now boasted two full time clerks and a small warehouse had been acquired to handle merchandise storage and shipping for the owl mail orders. Hermione was likewise working almost non stop since joining the office of Regulation of Magical Creatures. She worked normal business hours tending to the regular tasks assigned to her and the rest of the time she was researching the previous and current status of the so called ‘lesser magical races’ for a report she wanted to present to the department head. This left the two of them with limited time to be together but they seemed happy and willing to let nature take its course.

Everyone took seats at the kitchen table to talk and a few moments later Mrs. Weasley came in through the back door.

“Good morning everyone. I was bringing some tea out to your father in his shop. He’s up to something in there, mark my words. Would only open the door wide enough to fit the cup through. Harry, dear. I know you did it with the best of intentions but I’m beginning to think that shop wasn’t such a good idea.”

Harry could only shrug and smile.

“Oh, come on, Mum. Dad has been putting in a lot of time since he was made head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. He needs to do something to unwind,” Bill said.

“I understand that, Bill. But I just have visions of another one of those flying Anglias.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Mum. He can fit a much larger car in that new shop than an Anglia,” Bill replied with a straight face.

Mrs. Weasley only response was to set her fists on her hips and glare at her eldest son. Everyone else was doing their best not to laugh. It was early in the afternoon when George and Angelina arrived and the party was able to begin. Harry may have been turning twenty but the concept of a happy birthday was still relatively new to him. The first ten years were nothing short of dismal thanks to the aggressively antagonistic way that the Dursley’s acknowledged that Harry had managed to survive another year. The turning point came on his eleventh birthday when he met Hagrid in the little shack on the wave and wind swept island where he finally learned of his true heritage and the duplicity of his aunt and uncle. In the years that followed, while still spent at the Dursleys home, his birthday announced his release from that unhappy place and the haven of the Burrow. So today marked only the third time he marked the passing of another year with joy, love and the expectation of a relatively happy year to come.

He was also more than happy to share the day with George and Angelina. The announcement of their engagement the day before had caused quite a stir. According to the most reliable sources George selected the busiest part of the day to invade Angelina's Ice Cream Haven with some of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes loudest noise makers and once he had her attention wrote 'Will you marry me?' in glowing letters over the heads of her stunned customers. She immediately replied a very enthusiastic yes and then threw a scoop of Rocky Road at him. It was a match made in heaven.

When the happy couple arrived at the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley made a great fuss over her soon to be daughter-in-law. Ginny, Fleur and Hermione added to the attention and for the first hour of Harry's party the ladies formed a small knot of chatting, giggling sisterhood that included any number of glances at the men which only seemed to increase the level of laughter. Mrs. Weasley finally called a halt with a reminder that this was Harry's party and pressed the girls into service to move the food and tableware outside. The use of some deft wand work made the task go quickly and soon everyone was seated at the table and tucking into a variety of Molly Weasley's finest work.

The conversation around the table varied. The Weasley parents were talking with George and his bride to be about plans for the wedding which were practically nonexistent as George repeatedly had to remind his mother that only twenty four hours had passed since he proposed. Bill was talking to Harry about how his first years had been doing in Bill's second year class. Harry was very gratified to know that they had all done very well and that the Headmistress had repeatedly expressed her dismay that Harry had decided to pursue law enforcement as opposed to education.

Harry could only smile and remind Bill that he had come back three times during the past school year to conduct seminars with the older students. This was done at some professional risk as the senior Aurors did not take it well that Harry was being taken out of training nor did they approve of him being afforded any special status. However, the requests were endorsed by the Minister of Magic so they could not make their objections too loudly but Harry could feel the pressure. But it was a pressure he could deal with as it kept him

in contact with the school and its students. A rapping on the table brought the conversations to a halt.

“Well, my dears, what do you say we get to the real reason we’ve all gathered here today?” Molly Weasley asked of her family, both by blood and by love.

With a flick of her wand and the murmured words ‘Accio cake’ a towering creation of baked wonder drifted through the open door of the kitchen to come to rest on the middle of the table directly in front of Harry. It was evident that Mrs. Weasley had truly outdone herself with this one. The base layer was at least two feet in diameter with four additional layers rising to a height of three feet. Each layer had a different frosting on it including chocolate, strawberry, vanilla and what looked a lot like pumpkin.

“Wow, this is amazing, Mum, but how do you expect us to eat all of this? There’s enough here to feed an army,” Harry said in amazement.

“Funny you should say that, Harry, because that’s just what it’s intended to do.”

“What do you mean, Mum?”

“Just wait about another ten seconds, dear and you’ll find out. Let me see now, five, four, three, two, one, now.”

And with that a rapid series of popping came from all parts of the yard as wizards and witches began Apparating all around them. In very short order all the surviving members of Dumbledore’s Army were standing around the table and shouting birthday greetings. Harry struggled to get to his feet and when he finally did he received many hugs and kisses from the young women and handshakes and back slaps from the guys. When the uproar died down he looked over to his ‘parents’ with a question plain on his face.

“Well, Harry,” Mr. Weasley began, “a certain young lady whom you might be familiar with,” and he looked at his daughter, “came up with the idea after you came home from your second visit to Hogwarts and you were commenting on how you missed being there and missing all

your friends. Your mood was certainly melancholy for a few days afterwards. So we started sending owls around and here we are.”

“All I can say is it’s a brilliant idea,” Harry answered and then looked down at Ginny and smiled, his eyes bright. “Thank you, love, this is the best birthday present I could ever hope to get.”

He bent down and gave Ginny a kiss and a hug. Then he took the knife that was offered and cut the first piece of cake and put it down in front her. In fairly short order the great work was reduced to a fraction of its original size and everyone was enjoying the treat and each others company.

Angelina and George were receiving a great deal of attention as the word of their engagement spread through the new arrivals. Harry was having a discussion with Neville who was splitting his time between field work for a research project he was assisting Professor Sprout with and dating Hannah Abbott. Harry had seen them together on more than one occasion at the Leaky Cauldron as he passed through on his way to Diagon Alley either on personal business or during the investigation into the fencing of the stolen magical items. He was happy for his friend. A lot of catching up was being done as some of the DA members hadn’t seen each other since graduating over two years ago.

The sun was approaching the horizon when a very frazzled looking George came over to sit next to Harry who was enjoying a quiet moment.

“Mate, take my advice. When the time comes for you and Ginny just run off somewhere and get married before anyone has the chance to tell you how to do it.”

Harry could only laugh.

“You must be kidding, George. If I deprived your mother of the opportunity to plan her only daughter’s wedding I’d never find a cave deep enough to hide in.”

"You're probably right. There's something else I wanted to talk to you about though," George said turning serious. "There's been some rumors floating around Diagon Alley that someone has been trying to get control of all the action in Knockturn Alley. It seems to have started just after those arrests for all the stolen stuff from that Death Eater's place. You didn't have anything to do with that did you, Harry?"

"Sorry, George, can't tell you anything about that," Harry replied.

"Which tells me a whole lot. Anyway, I thought you should know. Some of the shop keepers are worried that if they get a hold of Knockturn, Diagon will be next."

"Okay, George. I'll mention it when I go in tomorrow. I don't know if they will pay any attention. I'm just a trainee and they seem to be concentrating everything on finding the last of the Death Eaters and other Voldemort followers. It's almost as if they are obsessed with it. The only reason I think they went after all the stolen stuff is they thought it would help lead them to any of the others still out there."

"Whatever you can do, mate. We'll let you know if we hear anything more."

Harry just nodded. The party began to wind down as the sun was setting and after hugs and handshakes and promises to keep in touch popping sounds announced that the guests were slowly heading for their homes. The last to leave were Neville and Hannah. Neville and Harry were talking about Hogwarts, with Neville asking for some tips since Professor Sprout had been pushing her research assistant to start giving lectures to her more senior students on his collection trips and field research.

Despite his performance during the Battle of Hogwarts he was still fundamentally a quiet, shy young man and he wasn't comfortable with the idea of being up in front of a group of students. Harry was doing his best to convince his friend that it wasn't that big a deal and with all he had been through this would be a walk in the park. He even offered to help him lay out what he wanted to say and rehearse it. Ginny and Hannah chimed in with offers to be test subjects as well

and the young herbologist seemed to be more at ease about the idea as he and Hannah took their leave and Disapparated.

As Harry had predicted when he arrived at the Ministry the following morning, his superiors were decidedly uninterested in what he had to tell them.

“We have bigger issues to deal with at the moment, Potter. We’re stretched thin enough with tracking down the last of Voldemort’s followers and attending to those we’ve already caught.”

While Harry wasn’t surprised with what he heard, he still wasn’t happy about it. It bothered him that while the Aurors continued their relentless pursuit of what was left of the Death Eaters and lesser followers of Voldemort they tended to ignore situations that would be of more importance to the average witch or wizard. In addition, the repeated assertions that the ranks of the Aurors were so thin flew in the face of the fact that they were doing so little to recruit new members. Harry was one of only five recruits and they were drawn from two graduating classes and one wizard in his early twenties. And as best as Harry could determine, not a single Auror came from a family that had any muggle parentage. This elitism, as Harry saw it, seemed to permeate the entire philosophy of the Aurors and was hampering its ability to effectively protect the wizarding community. However, he figured a trainee would have little hope of changing how things operated, at least for now.

Several more weeks of training had passed when Harry once more found himself in the office of the Director of the Office of Magical Law Enforcement. This time it was just Harry and the Director. As before, the Director took his time before he began to speak.

“Well, Potter, despite our original misgivings, it appears that you’ve found a true calling here. I’m not saying this to pat you on the back, but to prepare you for what’s coming. With the scarcity of Aurors we can’t afford to keep someone in training when they’re obviously ready for assignment. You’re to report to Maxwell as soon as we’re finished here. You’ll be working with him on this case. Any questions?”

“No, sir.”

The Director nodded and said, "On your way then."

Harry stood up and left the Director's office and made his way to the cluster of little offices that the senior Aurors called home when they weren't out chasing down dark wizards or witches. He found the one that had the name 'Maxwell' on a plate above it. He knocked firmly and was told to come in. He opened the door and stepped in. The room was little more than a large closet with just enough room for the desk, two chairs, one on each side of the desk and a row of four drawer file cabinets along the rear wall. The man behind the desk was the same that had led the group of six Aurors that had come to arrest the three would-be burglars shortly before Christmas of Harry's last year at school. With everything he had been exposed to this last year he was surprised they were able to spare that many.

"Sit down and close the door, Potter."

Ordinarily that would be said the other way around but the room being so small, the visitor had to be sitting in order to give the door room to swing shut. Maxwell leaned back in his chair as much as the file cabinets allowed and looked at Harry. His lips tipped upward in a small smile, the first Harry had seen on one of the usually dour faces since his training started.

"It's seem we need your peculiar talents, Potter. Your performance this past year has given the Director the, well, I won't say confidence, but at least he didn't reject it outright, the suggestion that we use you for a tricky mission."

Harry merely nodded to acknowledge that he was about to be tested again. Maxwell continued,

"We've been on the trail of a tricky little wizard that managed to make quite a bit of money dealing with the Death Eaters over the last twenty years or so. We've had him cornered twice since you finished off Voldemort but he's managed to give us the slip. We think that he's using some sort of cloaking spell and possibly a broom to make his get away. We believe we have him located again. We want you to fly high cover and do whatever it is you do to chase things you can't see.

Don't look so surprised, Potter. We read the sports pages, too. Your performance during that blizzard attracted a lot of attention," Maxwell said the last with a laugh.

"Do you have a picture or description of him, it might help me 'find' him," Harry replied.

"No photograph, but here's his description and an artist's sketch," Maxwell said handing Harry a piece of paper.

The wizard described would not have been difficult to recognize on the street if he went about without a disguise. He was supposedly only five feet tall, thin, balding with popped eyes and very bad teeth. He favored the archaic robes of the medieval period. Apparently he had made a rather sizable fortune dealing with the Death Eaters providing contraband magical items, information and helping them maintain contacts particularly in the interim years between Harry's first encounter with the darkest of wizards and his ultimate demise. His real name was unknown, he was simply known as "the source".

"It's still early, Potter and it's likely to be a long night. I suggest you go somewhere and get some sleep. Wear something warm too. We've tracked him to a small island in the Hebrides and even at this time of year it's likely to be a bit chilly in the air. Meet me here at six this evening. And don't forget your broom."

"Yes, sir."

Since the start of training, Harry had been making use of the Black house. It was still spelled so that it wasn't visible to the muggle neighbors and a few days of work had it comfortable if not as homey as the Burrow. Kreacher had resumed his residence there and kept it habitable for Harry. One major modification had to do with the portrait of Sirius' mother that had the unfortunate habit of screaming all kinds of nastiness whenever it was disturbed. The portrait was magically affixed to the wall and since it couldn't be removed Harry solved the problem by covering it up. He had his get well scroll framed and hung over the portrait. All in all the townhouse proved quite livable considering he mostly used it as a place to sleep.

So it was that just before noon he Apparated on to the magically shielded front stoop of his London home and was met at the door by Kreacher.

“Master Harry is home early.”

“Yes, Kreacher. It seems I have an assignment for tonight and it was suggested I try and get some sleep. I doubt I will but at least I can relax. Would you please make me some lunch?”

“Kreacher would be pleased to do so.”

“Thanks.”

Harry made his way to the small room that he had turned into his study. It contained a well upholstered chair where he would sit when he had the chance to read or just wanted to relax. There was also a small desk and book shelf where he put a small but growing collection of books on magic. On the eve of departing the school as a student for the last time he had paid a visit to the Head’s office to say good bye, for the time being at least, to his mentor, Professor Dumbledore. The former Headmaster, now dead and speaking from his portrait, had dictated to Harry a list of suggested reading that he was finding to be very beneficial. A few of the volumes were pretty rare and he had to rely on his contacts at Flourish and Blotts as well as Gringotts to find them. They were still searching for two more.

In short order Kreacher arrived with Harry’s lunch and a sealed note. It was from Ginny. They hadn’t seen each other in a week and Harry quickly opened the wax seal and unfolded the parchment.

Dearest Harry,

It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen those stunning green eyes of yours. I miss you terribly. The season continues to go well. I don’t know if you’ve had time to read the sports page but we’ve won our last three matches and our winning streak is now at ten. There has been some talk of an invitation to a tournament in France after the regular season is done. It would be so much fun and it would be even better if we could go together but I know you are being pressed very

hard but it looks like I should be able to get to London to see you this weekend. Please let me know if you think you'll be free. I have to go now, my love. We are getting ready to practice so I'll close now and send my owl to you. I'm so happy that you thought to get me an owl so that we could stay in touch this way. I'm such a lucky girl.

All my love,

Your Ginny.

Harry couldn't help but smile as he read and reread the words. He closed his eyes and he easily called to mind that beautiful smiling face framed in flaming red hair. He sat back in his desk chair, his lunch waiting for him on a tray on the desk. After all that time they had spent together, first during his recuperation at the Burrow, then at Hogwarts while they completed their education, these long periods of separation were proving difficult for Harry. He had spent so much time alone as a child growing up at the Dursley's that he thought he'd be used to it but having found friends and family and the love of his life, the time spent apart was painful. He opened his eyes with a sigh and began to eat his lunch. He disposed of the meal quickly, eating for necessity as opposed to enjoyment and when he was finished he retired to the well cushioned chair to relax.

At half past five, Kreacher entered after knocking respectfully. He picked up the tray from the desk and spoke,

"It is nearly time for Master Harry to leave for the Ministry. Kreacher has placed Master Harry's broom and heavy flying cloak by the front door."

"Thanks, Kreacher. I'm not sure when I'll be getting back tonight so there's no need to wait up for me."

"Kreacher will be here to greet Master Harry as Kreacher should."

"Ok, Kreacher, thanks, see you later," Harry said with a smile.

It was almost two years since Kreacher had agreed to accept his freedom and begin to work for Harry and collect wages. Harry had

only been able to get Kreacher to accept the modest sum of six sickles a week but Harry was sure that over time he could get him to take something more equitable. Kreacher had become much more agreeable to the idea of wearing clothes and Harry had presented him with a well made selection of outfits made by a tailor in Diagon Alley. Hermione was particularly pleased with how the situation was taking shape and was using it as a forceful argument for better treatment of the elves.

Harry collected his broom and cloak and went outside to Apparate to the Ministry. Like Hogwarts, the Black house had been spelled to protect it from direct Apparation inside. Over the centuries the Blacks had accumulated some pretty dangerous enemies and even more dangerous friends. The house was heavily warded against magical attack.

At the appointed hour Harry knocked on the door of Maxwell's office. Instead of being invited in, Maxwell came out and waved Harry to follow him. They proceeded down a long hallway to a larger common room. It contained several couches, half a dozen chairs around a battered old table and a counter that held a small two burner electric hot plate, two kettles and a number of mismatched tea mugs. Several Aurors were sitting around the table drinking tea and eating rolls. They turned their heads when Maxwell and Harry entered the room.

"This is Potter," Maxwell offered by way of introduction. He then turned to Harry and pointed at the two wizards and one witch. "Anderson, Truncheon and Muntab." Each nodded in turn. Harry did likewise.

"Here's the situation," Maxwell continued. "We have 'the source' under surveillance at his latest hideout. We are going to Apparate to the outskirts of Hogsmeade, then fly under cover of darkness to a spot near where he's holed up. Potter will stay flying high cover while we go after him. If he bolts like he has in the past we expect you, Potter, to either cut him off or chase him down. We'll provide what support we can once we get airborne but it will fall to you to keep him in sight, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

The other Aurors likewise nodded then stood. They made their way to the main lobby and formed up. They were to arrive at the entrance to the memorial park that used to be the site of the Shrieking Shack. Brooms in hand they disappeared from the lobby and in the next instant were standing on the dirt road that led into the park. Harry felt a momentary pang of sadness but he didn't have a chance to dwell on it as they mounted up and took to the sky. The late summer evening was still warm but as they gained altitude Harry was glad for the warm cloak. They flew in formation for over two hours before they arrived at their destination, a shallow depression in the ground that provided cover from casual observation. They were met by another Auror who had been huddled near the top of the rise that faced the tiny stone hut that supposedly contained their quarry.

"He's still in there. You can smell the coal smoke and I've seen him move past the window several times. There's only the one door and a window on either side. With five on the ground we should have him boxed in," said the watcher, Whitby.

"Yes, that's what we thought the last time and the time before. Hopefully, Potter will put the lid on the box. Okay, here's the way we'll do it. Potter, get up in the air. Make sure you're high enough to see all sides of the hut. I'll take the front door with Anderson for back up, Truncheon the north side window, Muntab the south side, Whitby you have the back side, just in case. Okay, let's move. Potter, get up there."

With a nod, Harry mounted his broom and climbed into the air. He went up to about one hundred feet and came to a slow orbit over the hut. He watched as the five Aurors crept towards the hut. They left their brooms about a dozen paces from the south side of the little stone building. They then finished getting into position. Harry began to count and when he got to twelve he heard more than saw that the front door was blown in by Maxwell. An instant later a sizeable hole was blown through the slate roof at the same time both side windows shattered outward. Harry looked for any sign of a fleeing wizard on a broom but there was nothing to see. He did see the other Aurors quickly close on the house.

Something didn't seem right to Harry so he closed his eyes and pictured the sketch of the wanted wizard. The picture in his mind's eye was hunched over and moving to the north as if crouched in a small space. Harry allowed his broom to drift in that direction still with his eyes closed. In a moment the figure stood up and appeared to mount a broom. Harry opened his eyes and looked down. In the darkness he could see nothing so he closed his eyes. The image was just getting airborne so Harry began to dive on the 'target'. It moved quickly but Harry was able to lock on just as he had on the snitch that fateful day in the blizzard. Something must have alerted the little wizard because the image began to accelerate. Harry did likewise and soon he was in hot pursuit. Harry opened his eyes to make sure he wasn't missing anything and he couldn't make out any visible flyer. Whatever spell 'the source' was using, it was certainly effective. So he closed his eyes again and urged his broom flat out.

His quarry must have sensed him somehow and began a series of evasive maneuvers trying to first hug the ground then rocket upward looking for cloud cover. It was to no avail. Harry's mind's eye was every bit as good as the most sophisticated muggle radar technology. Slowly Harry was closing on the fleeing wizard when a thought occurred to him. What was he going to do when he caught him up? This wasn't a Quidditch match and he wasn't chasing a snitch. He couldn't just reach out and grab him. He ran through several ideas until he settled on one. He was sure that the Aurors wanted him alive so he couldn't just blow him out of the sky but he also knew this wizard had derived a great deal of wealth out of the suffering of many innocent wizards, witches and not a few muggles so he wasn't inclined to go too soft with him. Harry could feel he was closing to within easy spell casting range so he withdrew his wand and took aim. He muttered 'Incendio' at the rear of the fleeing broom and saw the bristles promptly take flame. As the bristles burned he was able to open his eyes and see the fleeing fireball and the outline of the little wizard as the broom began to falter in the air. Quite suddenly the entire broom seemed to flare and the figure of the wanted wizard began to plummet to the ground. Harry dove after him and again with wand aimed muttered "Arresto Momentum" and then "Petrificus Totalus".

Harry followed the slowly, but not too slowly, tumbling rigid form as it approached then hit the ground with a satisfying thump. He came in for a landing and walked over to the figure laying in the tangle of his robes on the hard ground. His frozen facial features were locked in a grimace of fear since he had already been tumbling to the ground when Harry spelled him. He fit the description Harry had read pretty closely. The bulging eyes and bad teeth were clearly evident. His tangled robes hid most of the rest but it was pretty clear this was their man.

The other Aurors came in for a landing moments later and Anderson and Truncheon moved to take control of their prisoner while Maxwell approached Harry with an odd look on his face.

“Well done, Potter. I have to say you looked pretty odd up there darting around apparently all by yourself. We were starting to get a little concerned until we saw his broom catch fire. How were you able to keep on his tail like that?” the senior Auror asked.

Harry wasn't sure that he wanted to reveal too much about his ability so he simply said,

“I guess it's instinctive after all those years of chasing a snitch,” he replied, his face carefully neutral.

Maxwell merely nodded his head but his face clearly showed he didn't fully accept the answer. Harry could hear a low snort from one of the other Aurors but chose to ignore it.

“Ok, well, we're done here. Since we know where we are going we'll Disapparate back. It's been a long night so take it in steps. I don't want anyone getting splinched. Potter, you're done for the night. See you in the morning.”

Harry nodded and watched as the other Aurors popped out of sight along with their prisoner. He figured it was somewhere around ten o'clock so he felt it would be safe to use Hogsmeade as his first transit point and he Apparated onto the road that lead up to the school. After pausing for a moment he popped into the field across from the Burrow. Finally he was on the front stoop of the Black house

and before he could reach for the handle the door opened and Kreacher bowed Harry inside.

In the weeks that followed Harry was paired with Maxwell on several more assignments involving investigations into reports of sightings of this or that Voldemort supporter but nothing had panned out. It was beginning to appear to Harry that the Magical Law Enforcement office was chasing shadows. In the meantime George Weasley had sent him several messages dealing with the rumored infiltration of Knockturn Alley by a person or persons unknown intent on taking over. Harry was getting frustrated to say the least. In was late in September when Harry was notified of an assignment that was much more concrete in its purpose. He, in the company of Maxwell, Anderson and Truncheon were to travel to Azkaban Prison to escort a prisoner to trial. When they arrived Harry was somewhat taken aback when he discovered the prisoner was none other then Fenrir Greyback, the notorious werewolf and Death Eater.

It was evident that captivity had not been kind to Greyback, one of the most vicious and dangerous of Voldemort's minions. He was gaunt and unkempt, his prison uniform hung on his body in loose folds. But his eyes still held the same mad menace that Harry remembered from the two times they had come in close contact. His wrists and ankles were shackled with heavy iron cuffs joined by lengths of heavy chain. His wrists chains were linked through a heavy leather belt that was locked around his waist. He wore a heavy leather muzzle as his teeth were his most dangerous weapon. Harry was curious as to why he wasn't simply spelled into paralysis but now wasn't the time to ask.

As Harry was examining the restraints he made eye contact with the werewolf. The werewolf's eyes tightened and he began to growl low in his throat. Harry calmly maintained eye contact with the same expression he reserved for unruly students and the growl subsided to a faint whine. Maxwell had finished signing the papers for transfer of custody and was watching the exchange between the two former nemeses. After a moment he shook his head and said,

"Alright, let's get this one back to the Ministry."

"Yes, sir," replied Anderson and Truncheon in unison.

They each took an arm and half pushed, half carried the prisoner outside to the waiting boat that would take them from the island prison to the mainland. It was a miserable trip in the early autumn chill. On several occasions Harry's vigilant observation of the prisoner created eye contact and on these occasions the werewolf visibly cringed like a dog expecting to be disciplined by its master. Maxwell observed these exchanges without comment.

After several hours of rough sea passage they approached a secluded cove with what appeared to the casual observer to be a rickety, half-collapsed dock. Like the Hogwarts castle, the dock was enchanted to look like it was unsafe, but in fact was solidly constructed. A Ministry van was waiting to complete the transport of the prisoner. The ride was uneventful. Greyback was oddly subdued. As the journey neared its conclusion the werewolf seemed to shrink in on himself. The van pulled into the rear courtyard of the Ministry building and Greyback was hustled in through a barred steel door.

"Potter, meet me in my office in twenty minutes," Maxwell said as he went through the door behind the prisoner.

Harry didn't have a chance to respond so he shrugged and made his way to the Auror common room to get a quick cup of hot tea to ward off the chill of the boat passage. As he sipped the warming drink a familiar figure stood in the doorway.

"Hello, Harry, how have you been getting on?" Minister Shacklebolt asked in his deep voice.

"Hello, sir. I've been doing well, thanks," Harry replied.

"Yes, so I've been hearing. In fact I'd like to talk to you about that. Can you come up to my office at four o'clock?"

"Of course, sir."

"And Harry, don't speak of this to anyone, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The Minister nodded and walked down the hall. Harry didn't have time to consider the exchange as he had to get down to Maxwell's office. When he arrived he found the door was partly open and he stuck his head in. Maxwell looked up and waved him in.

"Sit down, Potter, and close the door."

"Yes, sir."

Maxwell leaned back in his chair and looked at Harry for several moments. Harry calmly returned his gaze.

"You know, Potter, I'm having a tough time figuring you out. Does anything get to you? And what was all that business with Greyback? You had him whining like a whipped puppy."

"About Greyback, I don't know what was going on. At first I figured he was trying to mess us about and I wasn't going to let him. Maybe I just reminded him of what happened with his lord and master," Harry finished with a shrug.

"And the rest of it?"

"What do you want me to tell you? I've lived through a lot of pretty bad stuff in my life and come out of it in pretty good shape. So what's there to get wound up about? Would it make you feel any better if I got all emotional and excited and screwed things up?" he responded matter-of-factly.

"You know, Potter, coming from someone else I'd say you were trying to be a clever dick, but not you, no. I'll lay it out for you this way. You make people around here nervous. You're an unknown and it's hard to trust an unknown. It's been decided that for the time being you're going to be on your own. You've been making a lot of noise about this business in Knockturn Alley so it's all yours. Go find out what's going on," Maxwell said, the last of it coming while he leaned forward across his desk. "Off you go, then. Report back when you have something worthwhile."

“Yes, sir,” was all Harry offered in response.

He opened the door, then stood up and walked out of the little office. He stood in the hallway for a few moments to gather his thoughts. On the one hand he was glad he was going to be able to look into what was causing a lot of concern in Diagon Alley. On the other he was disturbed by the idea that no one was willing to trust him even after he had acquitted himself so well so far. Just because he was someone they couldn't figure out, someone different. He wondered how they had felt about Tonks. Maybe she wasn't all that different.

He had another hour or so before he was due to visit Kingsley Shacklebolt. He had no idea what the Minister wanted to talk to him about but he thought it best that he have a clear head when he did. He had found a quiet corner down near the main lobby several months ago and he made his way down there now to spend a few moments to process what had happened during the day, particularly the last of it in Maxwell's office. Was it his fate to be some kind of lone wolf or were they testing him again, or perhaps simply trying to force him out of the Aurors.

This line of thinking wasn't going to get his head right so he closed his eyes and let his thoughts drift to his favorite people and place, Ginny, Ron, the rest of the Weasleys and the Burrow. These were people who knew him and trusted him and he trusted them. As long as he knew that, nothing would trouble him. And then too there was Hermione and Neville, friends who were more than friends. He allowed himself an inward smile and made his way to the elevators and up to the Minister's office. He arrived a few minutes early and took a seat in the waiting room. The elderly witch who was the Minister's secretary looked up as he did so and gave him a little nod.

When the large grandfather clock against the wall chimed four she gave Harry a wave to indicate he should go in. Harry took a breath and went to the door. He knew he shouldn't be nervous. After all, he had known Shacklebolt ever since that night he came with the others to escort him to safety from the Durselys. He had visited Harry at the hospital and come to his eighteenth birthday party. Yet he was entering the Minister of Magic's office for unknown reasons. He allowed himself the luxury to be a bit nervous.

"Ah, there you are, Potter, Harry. Please, come in and sit down," the Minister said in his deep voice.

"Yes, sir."

"I imagine you've been curious about why I've asked you to come up and see me."

"Yes, sir, I have."

"It's a simple thing really. I'd like you to give me your impressions about the Aurors," the Minister said.

"My impressions, sir?"

"Yes, Harry. It's well known that you are an intelligent and perceptive young man. Your work in establishing Dumbledore's Army speaks well of your leadership capabilities and that lecture you gave during your seventh year revealed a very insightful mind. I would think that by now you must have formed some opinions of how the Aurors operate. I assure you anything you tell me will be held in strictest confidence. Likewise I don't expect you to name names or act as an informant."

"I understand, sir, it's just that, well, you having been an Auror..." Harry said hesitantly.

"Forget about that, Harry. I'm asking as Minister of Magic and I won't take offense at anything you may have to say."

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked across the big desk at the Minister, who's normally impressive figure was enhanced by his robes of office.

"The Aurors as individuals are very effective in accomplishing missions but as a whole the office doesn't seem to be very efficient. I think they have an almost obsessive mindset about the remnants of Voldemort's followers."

“Don’t you think we owe it to the wizarding community to bring all of those responsible for all the misery they’ve caused us to justice, Harry? I would think you would be more sensitive to that than just about anyone.”

“Sir, Voldemort is dead. All his true Death Eaters are either dead or in prison. We recently captured their primary agent or source as he was called. The ones being sought are minor players yet we have all our top people trying to find them. In the meantime rumors of a criminal takeover of Knockturn Alley that could soon pose a threat to the businesses on Diagon Alley have been ignored until just this afternoon. I’ve been assigned the singular task of investigating these rumors. Which of these situations do you think is of more importance to the wizard or witch in the street?”

Shacklebolt nodded and looked thoughtful for a moment then said,

“How would you handle the situation then, Harry?”

“If it was up to me, I’d assign no more than half a dozen Aurors to running down the rest of the Voldemort fugitives and put more emphasis on the serious criminal activity that impacts the average member of the wizarding world. I’d have Aurors start paying more attention to what’s going on in Diagon Alley, get to know the shopkeepers and listening to what’s being said.”

“That could take a lot of manpower, Harry. Even if we back off on the whole Voldemort issue as you suggest we’d be hard pressed to maintain the staffing at Azkaban and put operatives on the street,” the Minister responded.

“Yes, sir and I understand that under current conditions that’s an issue but that brings up another area I see as a problem.”

Harry drew another breath before he plunged into what he felt was a going to be a very sensitive topic.

“The Aurors are involved with tracking down dark witches and wizards. The Magical Law Enforcement Squad handles the more mundane law enforcement and someone else deals with misuse of

this or that. It all seems so disjointed and it doesn't appear that one group talks to the other so if the Aurors are informed of something that's not their area they don't pass it on. A muggle police force has different levels of officers to deal with different levels of crime. They have the average officer on the street to deal with every day matters, detectives to do investigations, special teams to handle high risk situations, and so on. But it's all tied together. Maybe we need to consider something along those lines.

The Minister sat back in his chair and looked at Harry over his steepled fingers, his index fingers tapping together slowly. After a moment or two he leaned forward and folded his hands on his desk.

"You may have something there, Harry. If you haven't already, I'd like you to think about this some more and draw up a proposal on how we would go about implementing such a change. I'd like to see it in a week. You're to include organization, training, application standards, everything. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, a bit of uncertainty creeping into his voice.

"Don't worry, Harry," the Minister laughed. "This isn't a Hogwarts exam. The worse that happens is I don't like it and I make you do it over again. But do understand that I am serious about this, so give me your best effort, young man."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied more confidently.

"Excellent. That will be all for today, Harry."

At the dismissal, Harry stood up and walked out of the Minister's office, nodding to the secretary in passing and made his way to the elevator that took him to the lobby. Considering the amount of work he was just handed and his desire to get started on the investigation of Knockturn Alley Harry decided he would make his way to Diagon Alley to talk with George Weasley and then have dinner at the Leaky Cauldron to see if he could pick up anything there. The Cauldron wasn't full up when he walked in but it was doing a brisk business. Tom the proprietor hurried up.

“Stopping for an early dinner, Mr. Potter?”

“No, Tom, I’m on my way through to Diagon Alley but I’ll be stopping on my way back.”

“Right you are, Mr. Potter. I’ll have a quiet table set aside for you, don’t you worry.”

“Thanks, Tom. That would be great,” Harry replied as he thought that being the ‘Famous Harry Potter’ did have some advantages.

As he made his way back to the door that led to the magic portal he smiled and nodded at a few familiar faces and tried to ignore the whispers that followed him. With a few taps of his wand the brick wall folded back and he made his way out onto the street. In the two plus years since the fall of Voldemort things had improved in the wizarding world. Diagon Alley was getting back to normal with all the shop space occupied and a fair number of witches and wizards of all ages making their way here and there. The condition of the people looked better as well. Only a few of them looked as if they were still having a rough go of it but that had always been the case. Magical ability was no guarantee of a comfortable life. He was gratified to see that the Ice Cream Haven was doing a brisk business.

He made his way to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and entered the shop. Four or five customers were browsing the aisles and one was paying for his selections at the counter, occupying the time of one of the sales clerks. The other was at the opposite end of the counter, head down, making notes on a piece of parchment. Harry walked up to the counter and said,

“I’d like to speak to Mr. Weasley if I might.”

Without looking up the clerk said rather brusquely,

“I’m afraid Mr. Weasley is a very busy man and doesn’t have time at the moment, is there something I can do for you?”

“Yes, the first is to look at me when you talk to me and the second is to please go and tell George Weasley that Harry Potter would like to talk to him for a moment.”

The clerk visibly started and his head came up slowly, his eyes wide and his mouth gaped open slightly. Harry took this all in with a slightly bemused smile on his face and his eyebrows raised questioningly. The clerk stammered out a few incoherent phrases and then nodded and said ‘yes, sir’ a couple of times as he backed away and through the doorway that led to the back of the store. A moment later George Weasley emerged from the same doorway with a wide smile.

“Harry, good to see you. What brings you here?”

“I wanted to talk to you, privately if we can.”

“Sure thing, Harry. We can talk in my office, back this way,” George said as he waved Harry through.

Once they were seated on very comfortable chairs in the otherwise modest office George laughed and said,

“First off, Harry, what did you say to Diggsworthy? He came back here white as a sheet.”

“When I asked to see you he told me you were too busy and could he help me, all the while staring down at some piece of parchment. I just suggested he look at me when he talked to me and to tell you I was here to see you. That’s all,” Harry said quietly.

“In your quiet, serious voice?”

“Yes.”

“And you mentioned your name?”

“I believe I did.”

George laughed again.

"That explains it, very scary combination that. So, what can I do for you, Mr. Scary Potter," George quipped.

"I wanted to talk to you about the situation in Knockturn Alley. I've been assigned to investigate," Harry said, his mouth turned up in a half smile.

George got serious very quickly.

"Really? That's great, Harry. I thought they'd never get around to it before it was too late. Hope it isn't already. But just you, Harry?"

"Just me. Apparently I'm too 'unusual' to be trusted by the other Aurors so I'm getting single duty for the time being. Maybe it's another test," he said with a shrug.

"Hmm, dicey. But anyway. So far as anyone knows there is just one wizard involved. Some foreign guy it's said, heavy accent, some think east European, I overheard one guy say Mediterranean. Anyway, there has been a lot of talk about buying up shops or taking majority stakes. No direct threats but implying unpleasantness. A few shops have changed hands so far. That's not to say that there aren't others involved but the word is it's only one doing the face to face work."

"Hmm, ok. Where are you coming by this information, George?"

"Some of it I hear in the store. Other times it's from the other shopkeepers passing on what they've heard. A lot gets talked about at the Cauldron as well."

"Ok, I'm going to have dinner there tonight so maybe I'll pick up some more. I'd like to know who's next on the list for 'acquisition'. I have an idea on how to proceed but I need some more information," Harry said quietly.

"Just like the old days, huh, Harry. Investigating strange goings on."

"A bit, George, but in the old days I had Ron and Hermione to help."

“Yeah, the three amigos. I get the feeling Ron would like those days to come back around again.”

“What do you mean, George?” Harry said quickly.

“I don’t think Ron is all that happy these days, Harry. It was great having him help me get the business up and running but now it’s just a lot of the same old thing and I think he’s getting bored,” George replied.

“I guess getting rich doesn’t appeal to him so much anymore,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“I don’t think it ever did, Harry. I think he just felt he needed to help me get things going again and he didn’t really want to go back to school.”

“Maybe. I may have an idea that would appeal to him. Thanks for telling me, George, and thanks for the information on Knockturn alley. It’s a start and a big help.”

“No worries, mate. I hope you get to the bottom of it.”

With that, Harry stood up and shook hands with George and walked out of the shop and back onto the street. He looked around and decided to check in at Flourish and Blotts to see if they had any luck with those last two books. The proprietor told Harry that they had a strong lead on one of them that they were pursuing and a message had arrived from Gringotts just this morning that they were very close to acquiring the second. Harry was very pleased and said so, thanking the older wizard. He decided to take a stroll along the full length of the Alley just to see what there was to see. He walked past the first of the two stores that he helped to reopen and he allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. He was snapped out of his reverie by a loud shout from a jewelry shop across the street.

“Stop! Thief! Stop!” and almost immediately after a large scruffily dressed man lumbered out of the doorway clutching a handful of gold chains in one large hand and a wand in the other. Harry’s wand was out in an instant and he leveled it at the thief.

“Stupefy!” Harry called out but not too loudly.

The red beam struck the big man squarely in the chest and he went down in a heap. Harry hurried over to the man as he lay stunned in the street. The gold chains were still clutched in his large dirty hand. The shopkeeper came running out and slid to a halt on the other side of the thief.

“He smashed the glass on one of my display cases and grabbed those chains. He was pointing his wand at me the whole time,” the wizard said in a rush.

The whole time he was talking he was looking down at the would-be robber. When he finished he looked up at Harry, his eyes widening as he recognized him.

“Have you ever seen him before, sir?” Harry asked calmly.

“What? Oh, no, never have. He walked in and looked around a bit. I asked if I could help him with anything and he just shook his head. A minute later he had his wand in my face and was smashing the glass.”

“My name is Harry Potter, sir, and I’m with the Aurors office. I’ll take this man in but I will need to hold the chains for evidence. I’ll give you a receipt and you can claim them after his case is heard.”

The shop owner didn’t look happy but he seemed resigned to the situation.

“If you say so, Mr. Potter. Then again, if I can’t trust the famous Harry Potter, who can I trust, eh?” he said with a little half smile.

Harry just smiled a little back at him. He pointed his wand at the thief and muttered ‘Incarcerus’ and the big man was instantly bound in rope.

“If you’d write down a description of the items taken and their value we’ll both sign it and then I’ll take him in.”

“Certainly, Mr. Potter,” the man said and he hurried back into his shop.

Harry took a moment to look around. Witches and wizards were standing about in small groups watching and whispering to one another, but no one approached. The shopkeeper returned with a receipt book and offered it to Harry with a quill and Harry signed below the shopkeeper’s signature. The shopkeeper then pulled off a copy and gave it to Harry. Harry knelt down and removed the chains from the meaty hand and checked them against the receipt and then placed them in his pocket. He then pointed his wand at the man again and muttered ‘Wingardium Leviosa’ and the big body floated up to about waist height. With help from the shopkeeper he rotated the man until he was somewhat upright and then nodded for the store owner to step back.

“I’ll be in touch, sir,” Harry said and with that he Disapparated with his prisoner back to the lobby of the Ministry.

A number of witches and wizards were making their way out of elevators so they could Disapparate home. There were more than a few raised eyebrows as Harry guided the floating form of the thief into a vacated elevator for the ride down to the holding cells. Harry knew he had a couple of hours ahead of him filling out arrest report forms and he had missed his chance for dinner at the Cauldron. He was sure Kreacher would have something for him when he got home.

The week that followed was a busy one for Harry. He began his investigation of the Knockturn Alley situation with some discreet conversations with other Diagon Alley shopkeepers recommended to him by George. This provided some corroboration of what George had initially told Harry but little in the way of new information was forthcoming. He would have to proceed with the next phase of his plan with what information he had in hand. Secondly, he spent a good part of each evening working on the plan that the Minister had asked him for.

Based on his knowledge of muggle police forces, information he gleaned from visits to a muggle library and his own concepts he developed a plan that provided a layered structure for street policing,

crime investigation, a special tactical team as well as rotational and permanent guard duty at Azkaban prison. Against each layer he formulated minimum requirements and training.

During the week he even managed to fit in a visit from Ginny which included some shopping on Diagon Alley and dinner at the Cauldron. He had quietly informed Ginny what he was doing at the Ministers direction, after first having sworn her to strictest secrecy, and she was bubbling with excitement at the idea.

“Oh, Harry, that’s brilliant. Do you think he’s really going to redo the Aurors department?”

“I don’t know, Ginny. He said he was serious about me doing the plan but I don’t know, maybe it’s just another test.”

“I doubt that, Harry. I’ve heard all kinds of not so good things said about the Aurors over the last year or so. Things like why hadn’t they done something about Voldemort before it got so bad, why are they still chasing after people and not dealing with more everyday problems. Pretty much what you’ve apparently told the Minister. He has to know there are problems and he does want to improve the Ministry’s image, you’ve said so yourself.”

“I don’t know, love. I just know he said if I didn’t get it right he was going to have me do it over,” Harry said with a little smile.

Harry had also managed to have a talk with his best mate, Ron. Having heard what George said he thought he would sound Ron out about the matter personally. They were sharing lunch at the Cauldron.

“So how’s the business getting along, Ron?”

“Going great, Harry. Sales are climbing, people love our products, we may even have to expand the warehouse to deal with it all,” Ron said with a smile on his face but not in his voice.

“You’re enjoying it?” Harry asked with studied casualness.

“Yeah, I guess so, well, I don’t know, Harry. It’s all getting to be the same, you know. George is having fun coming up with new ideas and he really gets a charge out of dealing with the customers. It was fun when we were getting things moving, reopening the stores, working the long hours, the craziness. Now, we’ve got employees and payrolls and it’s more settled down,” Ron finished, his face a little clouded.

“Makes you wish for the old days at school when you didn’t know what was gonna happen next, huh?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, mate. Of course the fact that we lived through it makes it seem like a lot of fun now. Then, it was pretty scary at times,” Ron replied, his face coming alive at the thought.

“Speaking of that, I may need to ask you a favor with this investigation of Knockturn Alley.”

“Oh, yeah, what’s that?”

“I’m still working on the details but it would be great if I had some help. The Aurors office kinda left me by myself on this one.”

“Sure, Harry, I’d be glad to help.”

“Great, Ron, thanks.”

By the end of that busy week Harry had several things in hand. He was beginning to assemble a picture of what was going on in Knockturn Alley. He had Ron to fall back on when he needed help and he was sure it was going to be soon. He also had his plan drawn up and it was now in the hands of the Minister of Magic. It had been a tiring time and he decided a visit to the Burrow was just what he needed. It was around nine on Saturday morning when he knocked on the kitchen door of the Burrow and stuck his head in.

“Anyone home?” he called out.

“Harry, dear. It’s so good to see you,” Mrs. Weasley called to him from the stove. “Come in, come in.”

She hurried over to greet her 'adopted' son and gave him a big hug.

"Harry, since when did you ever have to knock on the door? This is your home, you know."

"I know, Mum, it's just that I'm not here much anymore so I didn't want to just barge in," Harry said with a smile.

"Barge away, dear boy. Now, have you had any breakfast yet this morning?"

"Um, no, in fact, it was a really long week and I only woke up a little bit ago. In fact, I'm starving," he said with an embarrassed smile.

"Tsk, sit yourself right down. I was just putting together something for your father and Ginny. She's home for the weekend, as if you didn't know."

"Um, I didn't, in fact."

Their conversation was cut off as a squealed "Harry!" rang through the big kitchen. A red headed blur crossed the room and threw herself into Harry's arms.

"It's so wonderful you're here, Harry. I was going to surprise you and here you went and surprised us," Ginny said excitedly from somewhere around Harry's chest.

"How were you going to surprise me, love?" Harry asked.

"After breakfast I was going to pop over to the Black house, if you weren't there I was going to have Kreacher find you for me. But you beat me to it," she said looking up at him with a smile.

"Harry, good to see you, son," Arthur Weasley said from the bottom of the stair case. "I figured you must have shown up when I heard your name all the way upstairs."

"Hiya, Dad. It's good to be home."

"All right, everyone. Sit yourselves down and let me get you fed."

"So, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, "how are things going for you? I know you've been doing field work now."

"Okay, I guess," Harry began. "I've done some investigative work and been in on an arrest. Now they have me looking into something going on in Knockturn Alley that George tipped me off to."

Mr. Weasley was looking at Harry intently.

"My boy, why is it I get the feeling your not telling us the whole story?"

"Well, I didn't want to say it but I'm having some issues, you could say. I'm on this latest assignment by myself. Apparently, none of the other Aurors are that comfortable working with me. Something about me being an unknown that no one can trust."

"What!" Ginny exclaimed. "What are those idiots thinking about? You nearly died to save all of us and you can't be trusted? I know about two dozen people who would walk into fire with you, those bloody fools."

"Calm down, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said to her red headed, and now red faced, daughter.

"Yeah, take it easy, sweetheart. It's not like anyone is trying to push me down a flight of stairs or curse me while I'm not looking," Harry said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Well, Harry, in a way it's not to be unexpected. The Ministry has always had a very deep streak of 'traditionalist' views. Remember how Fudge was about the whole pure blood issue. The Aurors are much the same way. Even though you come from a long line of wizards on your dad's side, they know your mum was muggle born and that bunch has a problem with that. Not to mention that you pretty much outclass every one of them in terms of ability and experience and technically you're still a trainee. There has been a lot of talk over the

years about shaking up the whole Magical Law Enforcement office but there was never any real push to do it.”

Harry thought for a moment but he knew these were some of the people he could trust absolutely.

“I think there is now,” Harry said quietly.

“What do you mean, Harry?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“Late last week, after we came back from escorting Fenrir Greyback from Azkaban to the Ministry for trial, Kingsley Shacklebolt had me come up to his office for a talk. He was asking me my impressions of the Aurors and after I told him what I had seen and what I thought about it he directed me to put together a plan on how I would reorganize the Aurors and the Magical Law Enforcement Squad. Experience, training, operations, the whole thing. I turned it in yesterday morning.”

“Wow, Harry, that’s brilliant. I know you’ve told me this already but it still sounds amazing. He must really be impressed with you to have had you do that,” Ginny said.

“Come now, Ginny, I think everyone is rather impressed by Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Obviously not, Mum, if those knucklehead Aurors don’t feel they can work with Harry. Jealous maybe, but not impressed,” Ginny said, the anger still evident in her tone.

“I agree with Ginny on one point at least, Harry. That is quite a compliment with Kingsley asking you to do that. We’ve had some serious discussions in our staff meetings with him and he is bound and determined to get the Ministry squared away and make it more relevant to the ordinary witch and wizard. I understand he’s had a few discussions with Dumbledore from his portrait at headquarters as well. Would you be willing to share some of your ideas with us?”

So in between mouthfuls of bacon, eggs and toast, Harry briefly described what he had put into his plan. Arthur Weasley nodded a bit and finally smiled when Harry was finished.

“Sounds like an excellent way to go, Harry. Your plan certainly seems to address most of the issues that have been talked about over the years. I know even Kingsley used to complain about the way the Aurors did business when he used to be one.”

Ginny took hold of Harry's right arm in both her hands and looked at him with adoring eyes.

“Is there nothing you can't do, Harry?” she said almost breathlessly.

“Yeah, I can't finish my breakfast with you hanging onto my arm like that,” he said with an impish grin.

Her look of adoration fell away and was replaced with mock outrage. She leaned back and smacked Harry's shoulder as she stuck her tongue out at him. Then she laughed and leaned in to kiss his cheek but allowed his arm to go free. Her hero was allowed to finish his breakfast. The breakfast set the tone for Harry's weekend. Ginny had both days off thanks to a break in the Harpies' playing schedule. They took walks along the lanes as they had when Harry was recuperating. They sat and talked while they played Gin Rummy, a game that Ginny introduced to the Harpies and was becoming quite good at. At night they sat around and talked about all kinds of things and by the time Harry went back to work on Monday morning he was feeling rested and relaxed.

He had asked Ron to keep his ears open for anything that might impact on his investigation. Ron was eager to help and since he alternated days between Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade he was able to cast a fairly wide net. While apparently no such pressure was being brought to bear in Hogsmeade there was some discussion about strange individuals seen around the town and going in and out of all the shops. By the second week Harry's surveillance in Knockturn Alley was beginning to bear fruit. He was able to identify the three shops that had been bought up as well as the fourth that was under pressure to sell. He also thought he had a suspect. Based

on a sketchy description he confirmed that a man who fit the bill spent a great deal of time in the three shops and was in the fourth on a daily basis if only for short periods of time.

However, Harry's work on the street was interrupted when he received a notice that he was to report to the Minister's office at nine the following morning. Harry assumed that the Minister, or more likely, one of his staff had found some time to go through his proposal and he was going to be given a lengthy list of problems he would need to address. So it was at five minutes to nine he was once more sitting in the reception room of Minister Shacklebolt's office with the older witch secretary doing her best to ignore him. Harry nervously listened to the big clock tick away the seconds and minutes until it began to chime the hour of nine and the receptionist waved him to the Minister's door.

Harry knocked and the deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt called him in. As Harry entered the room he noticed that the Minister was not alone. Sitting around his conference table were two other wizards and a witch. He didn't recognize any of them.

"Come in, Harry. Please, sit down."

Harry nodded and took the seat indicated by the Minister, directly across from him. He was aware of intense scrutiny from the others at the table.

"Harry, let me introduce you to several key members of the Ministry organization. The gentleman to my right is the Deputy Minister, Artemus Binsworthy. On my left is my chief of staff, Templeton Salisbury and lastly but by no means least, my administrative assistant, Amaryllis Firth. Everyone, this is Mr. Harry Potter. Now, Harry, I'd like to start out by saying that the proposal I had you prepare has been studied by everyone around this table as well as several others. Quite frankly Harry, we think it's a brilliant piece of work. It addresses what we feel are fundamental flaws and weaknesses in how we go about policing the magical community."

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied quietly.

“The task now is making it happen. We’ve spent a lot of time discussing all of this for the last several days, Harry. There have been a number of differing opinions on various aspects of your plan but there is one thing that we all agree on. You have to be the one to make it happen.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“It’s simple, Harry. As of this moment, you are in charge of the Aurors. Well, actually, all magical law enforcement. It will be your task to reorganize, recruit and train new members and put them to work for the benefit of the magical community. Any questions?”

Harry was stunned. He had fully expected that he would play a role in any plan that was finally accepted, probably in training based on his experience with the DA and being Bill Weasley’s teaching assistant but this was well beyond anything he imagined. A question did come to mind and he was too befuddled to hold it back.

“Yes, sir. Is this some kind of joke?”

The others around the table looked shocked, all except the Minister. He broke into a wide grin and laughed.

“No, Harry, it’s not a joke. I fully expected you to be surprised and your response is all too understandable.” Then his voice and manner turned very serious. “I’m going to be totally honest with you, Harry. The Ministry is in a great deal of trouble right now. I realize that with your falling ill after the defeat of Voldemort and then immersing yourself in school you probably weren’t aware of the state of matters around here. Most of the prominent members of the wizarding community here in Great Britain were screaming for our heads, literally. The fact that Voldemort had been able to get as far as he did, the number of co-conspirators that had been inside the Ministry and in the end it takes a group of students and townspeople to bring him and his gang down all but destroyed any credibility or standing that the Ministry had. A lot of my time has been spent trying to stave off a wholesale dismantling of the organization. One of the truly bright spots in all of this was having you come to work for us.”

Harry's face must have giving the Minister some idea of how he was reacting internally to all this. Despite some of the things Harry had said about himself in the past regarding having a swelled head sometimes, he was, at the core, a very self effacing young man. He never had developed his father's teenaged arrogance, largely as a result of the constant drumming that the Durselys had given him as a he grew up. Even his numerous infractions of the rules at Hogwarts were not the result of him feeling he was somehow privileged or above them but simply that he had to do it to accomplish whatever task he was about at the time.

"Harry, I know your story very well, and I've watched you grow and mature these last years, every since we met in the kitchen of your aunt and uncle's house that summer. Understand this," the Minister said, leveling a finger at Harry from across the table. "As we sit here, at this very moment, you are the most pivotal person in this entire Ministry. Don't shake your head at me, young man. This effort as you've proposed it is the first step, if you are successful, or the last, if you fail, in attempting to bring us back to a place of relevance to the magical community. We all believe you are the only one who can make it happen. And I'll be brutally honest with you, Harry. Even if we thought you might not be able to pull it off, we'd still probably have to put you in as a figurehead to get any support from the witch or wizard on the street. But that's not what is going on here. It's your job and I'm confident you can do it. Are we clear on this?"

Harry looked around the table at the other faces regarding him intently. From the gravity of their expressions he had to accept what the Minister was saying was true. He looked down at the table in front of him and closed his eyes. In a succession of flickering images he could see the faces of the Weasleys, especially of his beloved Ginny. He saw all the members of Dumbledore's Army grouped in front of him, all those students he had taught and lastly that elderly witch who had first approached him that day in Diagon Alley. He knew that he had to do this for them and all the other witches and wizards in his 'family' that he had not yet met. He opened his eyes and raised his head to look directly at the Minister of Magic.

"Yes, sir, I understand and I'm ready to begin."

Harry's Future, Part 7

It was well past midnight when Harry was finally ushered through the door of the Black house, his house in fact, by the house elf Kreacher. It had been a hectic, exhausting day. It began in the office of the Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt where he was offered, and accepted, the position of Chief of Aurors. The proposal that Harry had prepared by direction of the Minister on how to reorganize the Magical Law Enforcement department had impressed the Minister and others so much that they insisted that he take on the task in full by becoming the Chief.

His agreement precipitated a series of events that had him in this conference room or that until only a few moments before he arrived home. After he had agreed to accept the position he was introduced to a middle aged wizard by the name of Abernathy Grimsson. He was the newly appointed Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The previous Director, the dour former Auror that had interviewed Harry the year before had only been a temporary appointee and the Minister had decided he had really overstayed his time. The conversation between Grimsson and Harry was one he would remember for a long time.

"Well, Harry, I have to say I'm very pleased to be working with you. We all know your legend but I've been given a thorough briefing by various Ministry employees who know you and I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do with the department."

"Thank you, Mr. Grimsson. Are you coming from a different department here at the Ministry?" Harry asked.

"No, Harry, at least not now. I left this very department over ten years ago. I was having difficulties staying in step with how the other magical races were being treated and I've been in private law practice until the Minister contacted me last week about coming back. This is the important part, Harry. It's going to be my task to oversee the revamping of the legal system as regards the other magical races. I'm going to rely on you completely to handle restructuring your department and that includes bringing the other enforcement offices

into the fold. If you need any help, come see me, but I'm expecting you to operate as independently as possible."

"Yes, sir, I understand," Harry replied.

"There is one other matter I'd like to discuss with you, Harry."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm given to understand that you are a good friend of Hermione Granger, yes?" Grimsson asked.

"Yes, sir. She is one of my two best friends. In fact it goes quite a bit further than just friends, she's practically family," Harry replied with a small grin.

"I see. Well, can you tell me, Harry, what you think of Hermione?"

Harry was somewhat taken aback by the question and had to think a moment. He had said things about Hermione in front of family and friends but never in a situation like this before. He took a breath and then said,

"Hermione is the most intelligent, dedicated and hardest working person I've ever known. In the years I've known her she's demonstrated courage and loyalty more times than I can count and I've said this before, she deserves every bit as much credit for the demise of Voldemort and the Death Eaters as I've been given. I'm glad for every day I've been able to call her my friend."

The new Director looked at Harry for a moment and then nodded briefly.

"I'm glad you said that, Harry. It's my intention to ask Hermione to accept a position as my special assistant. I read her report on the status of the other magical races and it impressed me a great deal. What you just said confirms what I had thought. Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir, I'm looking forward to working with you," Harry said.

After that he took part in a nearly continuous series of meetings as the Minister continued his revamping of the entire Ministry. It wasn't until almost six in the evening before he had a chance to sit down and gather his thoughts. He was doing this over a cup of tea and a sandwich in the small room that served as the canteen for the Ministry. Harry was getting the impression that whoever designed the building and its rooms must have thought the place was going to be used by house elves. He recalled the rooms they went through that terrible night that Sirius died were all pretty large but those for the average Ministry employee were barely more than closets. He finished his brief meal and made his way to his new office.

He hadn't realized that the Director who had interviewed him had been the Chief of Aurors before his temporary appointment and the office had remained vacant for the last couple of years. It was perhaps three times the size of Maxwell's closet. Just big enough to avoid being claustrophobic. Harry found a piece of cloth and began to wipe down the desk top and chair. He heard a cough behind him and as he turned around he saw Maxwell standing just outside the open door. The look on his face was uncertain.

Harry dropped the cloth on the desk and said,

"Come on in, Maxwell. Close the door and have a seat," he said with a half smile.

Maxwell did so and sat looking at Harry as he took a seat behind the desk. He sat with his arms resting on the desk, his head tilted slightly to one side.

"Kind of an odd situation, wouldn't you say?" Harry remarked.

"Yes, it is, um, sir," Maxwell replied.

"So how did you find out so soon?" Harry asked.

"Anyone who's worked here for a while knows how to find things out. The word came down about an hour ago. Caused quite a commotion.

After what I told you the last time we talked there's also a lot of very nervous Aurors out there."

"What's the best space we can get for a meeting, Maxwell?"

"I'll see what I can scare up. You'll be here for a while?" Maxwell asked.

"For a good while, yes," Harry replied.

"I'll be back in bit."

Maxwell stood up and turned toward the door, hesitated a moment and then opened the door and went out into the hall. Harry watched as Maxwell disappeared from view. He shook his head and returned to straightening up his office. It's was about an hour later, while Harry was going though files that filled several cabinets behind his chair, when Maxwell returned. He simply stood in the open doorway and when he had Harry's attention he said,

"I managed to get the small amphitheater here on the second level for tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, sir. I put out the word and we should have pretty much the whole department minus a couple that are doing surveillance."

"Ok, I don't want to hamstring any operations but this won't take too long. I'll see you in the morning. Thanks."

"Yes, sir," Maxwell replied and left.

Harry was giving some thought to going home when a message fluttered into his office and dropped onto his desk. It directed Harry to come up to the Minister's office for a 'quick' meeting. It lasted until almost midnight.

When Kreacher closed the door behind Harry he let out a long sigh. He hung his cloak on the coat tree in the hall after bidding Kreacher good night, then he trudged up to his room. He managed to kick off his shoes and slip out of his shirt and pants before falling face down

on his bed. He was asleep in moments. It seemed almost as quick that he was being roused from his sleep by Kreacher.

“Master Harry must awake. He has a very busy day and he must get started.”

“Ok, Kreacher, I’m awake,” Harry replied, rather proud that he managed to stifle the groan he felt.

With the help of a shower, two cups of tea and a quick breakfast he managed to pull himself together enough to get to his desk by eight o’clock. He spent the time until he had to head down to the amphitheater jotting down notes on what he wanted to say. He knew a lot of it wouldn’t be popular but it had to be said. There would be no time later.

Promptly at nine o’clock he walked through the door that led to the small dais and lectern that was set up. There were five rows of seats rising up to the back of the room and six across. Thirty seats and a few out on surveillance. So few to try and protect the magical community of Great Britain. He let out a sigh and placed his notes on the lectern. He reminded himself that this was not an exercise in education but one of power. He needed to establish his authority and there was no time like the present. He stood up to his full height and took hold of each side of the top of the lectern and looked out over the assembled Aurors.

“Let me have your attention. In case there’s any question, I’m Harry Potter and I’m the new Chief of the Auror Department. You may not like it. You may not agree with it but that’s the way it is. I’ve been charged by the Minister of Magic to reorganize this department and make it one that the magical community can be proud of. This is how it will go. The Department will consist of several different levels. The basic level will be that of Patrollers who will be out on the streets of Diagon and Knockturn Alleys as well as all of Hogsmeade. The core of the patrollers will be the current staff of the Magical Enforcement Squad who will be supplemented with new recruits. In addition, Patrollers will rotate to supplement the guards at Azkaban, which will be restructured as well to free up more experienced personnel.

“Secondly, there will be a special investigative unit established to investigate criminal activity. That unit will be comprised of the Aurors that have demonstrated investigative skills as well as some members of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office. They have to do a lot of poking and prodding in their business. A Special Tactical Squad will be set up for handling special or dangerous situations. Trainers for the Patrollers and new prison guards will come from your ranks as well.

“As to the matter of the remainder of Voldemort’s followers, Maxwell will head a team consisting of Anderson, Muntab, Whitby and Truncheon to run the rest of them down. Let’s come to an understanding right here and now. There’s more going on in the wizarding world than the few remaining dregs of Tom Riddle’s gang of thugs. Starting right now we begin paying attention to those things because they are important to the people who matter. All of you sitting here and those few others out on assignment have to come to a decision. You can accept what has happened and embrace it. Or you can accept the fact that it has happened and you can hang in and do your jobs and make it to your pension. Or you can refuse to accept it and make plans to leave. If you feel that you can’t continue as a member of this department you have seventy two hours to put in for transfer without any adverse consequences. What you won’t be allowed to do is stay and undermine what we’re trying to do. That will result in summary dismissal with forfeiture of any pension regardless of seniority. And there will be no appeal, my word is final.”

Harry let his gaze sweep around the room. The expressions he saw included shock, dismay, grim acceptance and here and there, humor.

“Well, that’s all I have. Are there any questions?” Harry concluded.

“Why?” came a response from the back row.

“That’s a big question for one word; would you care to be a little more specific?” Harry responded.

“Why these big changes now? Voldemort’s gone, the worst is over.”

Harry looked at where he thought the question and comment had come from, the actual speaker obscured by shadows in the back of the room.

“Because we failed, this department in particular and the Ministry as a whole. If looked at objectively it would be very easy to argue that the defeat of Voldemort and the Death Eaters was in spite of this organization, not because of it. His first rise to power twenty or so years ago was stopped because he ran afoul of an ancient magic. I think you all are aware of that story. His most recent and final fall came at the hands of a bunch of students, teachers and every day folks. And I won’t even begin to discuss how it was that so many of his followers were able to avoid any consequences the first time around so that they could help pave his way back to power. As far as the magical community is concerned we are abject failures and it is to them that we are ultimately responsible, not the other way around.”

Harry paused to let what he said sink in.

“So I think that’s all for right now. Go back to work and think it over. Oh and Milligan, you’ll be heading up the new Investigative section, if you plan to stick around. I’d like to see you at eleven in my office, please.”

With that, Harry turned and headed for the door. He was about half way when he felt a faint but somehow familiar feeling and a buzzing in his ears that resolved itself into a soft repetition of the word ‘resign’. Someone was trying the Imperious curse on him. He simply gave his shoulders a shrug and with the brief exertion of will threw off the spell. Without turning and with his hand on the door knob he said out loud,

“I suggest to whoever it was that just tried to use the Imperious curse on me to get me to resign, start running. If I ever catch up with you I guarantee you’ll regret it till your very last day.”

To the sound of several gasps and more mumbling he opened the door and left. He wasn’t sure if he should be angry or disappointed in what happened. He was half tempted to have each Auror submit to taking Veritaserum and ask them a few questions but he knew that was no solution. So he made his way back to his office and continued

his combing of the files for any useful information. His door was open and he looked up when he heard the quiet knock on the door frame. A tall, lanky wizard of middle years was standing there expectantly.

"Milligan?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Right on time, please come in. Close the door and have a seat."

Milligan did as instructed and was soon folded into the chair opposite Harry. As with Maxwell, Harry had his arms resting on the desk, his head slightly tilted as he observed the Auror. Then he said,

"As I was going through the files here yesterday and this morning, your name showed up on a number of reports involving investigations into this or that. More so than any other Auror by far. Why is that?"

Milligan gave a shrug and said,

"Natural tendency I guess you'd say. Even during my years at Hogwarts I was always sticking my nose into something, finding things out. When I got here, after my first year out of training, I was involved in a case that had to do with smuggled contraband and I guess I asked the right questions and looked in the right places and cracked the case. After that it seemed whenever they needed someone to poke and prod, they called on me."

"Well, it's happening again," Harry began. "As I've said, you're going to head up the new Investigation Unit. Pick your people, say eight to start with, and give me the list and I'll assign them to you. You'll also get some help from the Department of Magical Catastrophes, they do a lot of poking and prodding over there and the Director has agreed to lend me two seasoned investigators to help train your team. Your first assignment is to find out what's going on in Knockturn Alley. Someone is trying to buy up the shops there, in whole or at least a majority interest. The fear on the street is that Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade will be next. Let's find out what's going on."

"Yes, sir."

Harry spent the next hour filling Milligan in on what he had found out so far and by the time he was done he felt comfortable that the man understood what he wanted. Harry sat back in his chair and looked at the wizard, who was probably twice Harry's age.

"So, are you in?" Harry asked.

"Sir?"

"Are you staying or going?"

"I'm staying. I've got too much time invested and it's the only thing I'm really good at. I can live with the way things are headed," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Good. Let me know when you have that list ready."

"Yes, sir," Milligan said as he stood up and made ready to leave. As he was reaching for the door knob he turned his head and said over his shoulder,

"Did you want me to look into that Imperious business from before?"

"No, that won't be necessary. I'm sure it will resolve itself in time."

"Yes, sir," and he was gone.

Harry got up and followed in Milligan's footsteps. His stomach was telling him that breakfast had been a while ago and he needed to get something to eat. He made his way down to the little canteen he had found and had a sandwich and tea. A note fluttered into the room and dropped onto the table in front of him marked Personal. When he opened it, it simply asked that he report to the Director's office at one o'clock that afternoon. Harry sighed, thinking it was the start of another long day of meetings but he knew it went with the job. It didn't make sense to walk back to his office and then back to the Director's so he stayed where he was and began jotting down notes in a small notebook he had begun to carry inside his robe. At around ten

minutes to one he got up and made his way up to the Director's office. The Director's secretary told Harry he could go right in and he did so after knocking on the door.

What he didn't expect was the reception he got after stepping through the door. In the blink of an eye he was wrapped in a bear hug with a head of bushy hair tucked up under his chin. When he looked around he could see Director Grimsson looking at him with a wry smile.

"Um, Hermione? Are you sure you should be doing this?" Harry asked.

"It's ok, Potter," Grimsson said, "considering the circumstances and your long established relationship. But I wouldn't make a habit out of it."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied with a grin.

Hermione released her death grip on him and stepped back. Her face was alight with a big smile and her eyes were shiny.

"Sorry, Harry, I just got a little carried away. But this is such a dream assignment for me and after Director Grimsson told me what you said when he asked you about me I guess I couldn't help myself."

"If half of what Potter said is true, Ms. Granger, you'll be an invaluable asset to me and this department," the Director said.

"You won't be disappointed, Sir. I'm sure what I said didn't cover the half of it," Harry said quietly.

Hermione smiled again, a faint blush touching her cheeks.

"Well, I'm glad to see that you two do indeed get along so well. I have an assignment for both of you. Now, Potter, I know you are up to your chin in work right now but I need you to make a brief detour and accompany Ms. Granger to Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts, sir?" Harry asked.

“Yes. Ms. Granger’s first assignment is to make contact with the Centaur community in the Dark Forest. I’ve asked that she make contact with each of the other magical races to begin the dialogue the Minister wants to establish. Your presence will lend weight to the proceedings and I hope help with the trust issue. As you’re probably already aware Centaurs have little trust for humans and practically none for the Ministry. Making first contact might be the trickiest part,” the Director said.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and said in unison,

“Hagrid.”

“Excuse me?” Grimsson said.

“Hagrid is the groundskeeper and Professor of Care of Magical Creatures at Hogwarts. He is well known to the Centaurs,” Hermione told her boss. “We can contact him by owl and ask that he act as an intermediary. He’s been a good friend to both of us since we were first years and he’s known Harry since he was born.”

“Oh yes, I recall him now, big fellow. Excellent. Please keep me informed. That will be all for now, thank you.”

As Harry and Hermione left the Director’s office her face lit up in a big smile.

“Wow, Harry. This is great. It’s kind of like old times except a lot less dangerous,” she enthused.

“I dunno, Hermione. Anything can happen in the Dark Forest. And the Centaurs were pretty divided about intervening in the last battle. Just making contact will be a big accomplishment.”

They decided to go down to Harry’s office to talk over what they needed to do and compose a message to Hagrid. Once they were seated and the door was closed Hermione picked up on the conversation.

"I hear what you're saying about the Centaurs, Harry. My guess is it will take years to come to any firm agreement but the important thing is to get started. I have no illusions about any quick turn around in our relations with the other races, but if it's going to be a lifetime's worth of work, it's a certainly a goal worth a lifetime."

Harry could only nod and smile.

"But it's just so great that you and I are working on something together again," she said and then she looked at Harry.

She took in the unruly hair, the brilliant green eyes and the jagged scar and was taken by a sudden realization. Her eyes grew misty and Harry said,

"Hermione, what's the matter? You're looking at me kind of strange."

"I'm sorry, Harry. Nothing is the matter. I was just sitting here and had a thought is all. You and I have a very special relationship. I know how you and Ginny feel about each other and there's me and Ron but you and I are linked somehow, different, but just as strongly in a way."

"What do you mean? I mean we are best friends I think, right?" Harry asked.

"I think it's more than that, Harry. As I've said before, you were the first one that I could really consider my friend. Even before coming to Hogwarts I didn't have anybody that I could call a real friend. Too busy with my nose stuck in a book to make any. Even with me badgering you about the rules all the time and then that ghastly business when Sirius sent you the Firebolt we still managed to stay close and get closer over the years. Why is that, Harry?"

"I dunno, Hermione. I guess I never really thought about it before. In some ways we're alike but in others we couldn't be more different. Maybe it was just meant to be. If we accept the idea of prophecies and that kind of thing it sort of implies that some things are supposed to happen. And if I was to have any chance of succeeding I'd need help. You were a big part of that help so here we are."

"Maybe, Harry, maybe. Well, as nice as this is it's not getting the job done. Let's write to Hagrid and see what he can do to help."

"Now that's the Hermione I know and love," Harry said with a smile and pulled out parchment, ink and a quill and pushed it across to Hermione.

"You write so much better than I do."

Hermione could only smile and laugh as she dipped the quill and began to compose the message to Hagrid. After the message was composed they began to discuss how they would approach the Centaurs and what they might expect as reactions. They were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," Harry called out.

The door swung open and Milligan stood in the doorway, a piece of parchment in hand. Noticing Hermione he stepped back.

"Sorry, sir, I didn't realize you were busy," Milligan said.

"It's ok, Milligan. Pulling some double duty. What can I do for you?"

"I have the list you wanted."

"Come on in and let's see what you've got," Harry said as he waved the older man in.

Milligan stepped past Hermione and handed the parchment to his new boss. Harry scanned the names and as they didn't coincide with any of the names he knew were earmarked for other assignments he nodded, borrowed the quill from Hermione and wrote a brief note on the parchment. He then handed it back to Milligan.

"They're all yours, Milligan. Put them right to work. Shake Knockturn Alley and see what falls out."

"Yes, sir."

“Oh, and by the way, Milligan. This is Hermione Granger. She’s the new special assistant to Director Grimsson.”

“Ma’am,” Milligan said as he nodded to her, then Harry and left the room.

Hermione watched as the man left the office and then she looked at Harry with a quizzical look on her face. The she smiled at Harry and said,

“It’s like you were born to it, Harry.”

“What?”

“To lead, my friend. You did it at Hogwarts and now here.”

Harry just shrugged and gave her one of his crooked smiles. She just shook her head and laughed. She left about fifteen minutes later telling Harry she would take care of getting the message to Hagrid. Harry spent the remainder of the day going through more of the files. Around five thirty Harry looked up at the clock. He hadn’t been called to any meetings so he figured he would stop in at the Cauldron for dinner and see what he might dredge up about the Knockturn Alley situation. He decided he would walk so he left his wizards robe hanging on his door and proceeded to the elevator that would bring him up in the muggle telephone booth that they had used all those years before. It was a cool early fall evening and the walk was enjoyable. Harry hadn’t seen much of the muggle world in the last few years.

He opened the door to the Cauldron, completely unnoticed by the many muggles who walked by. He stood there and let his eyes adjust to the dimness in the main room. As his eyes swept over the room he noticed that Neville and Hannah Abbott were sitting at a small table along the back wall. Neville was waving Harry over. Harry approached his two friends with a smile.

“Congratulations, Harry. We’ve only just heard the news. Chief of the Aurors, that’s amazing,” Neville said as he stood up to shake Harry’s hand.

“Thanks, Nev. How did you find out?”

“It’s all over the street in Diagon Alley. You as Chief, Hermione as a special assistant to the new Director. The Minister is really shaking things up,” Hannah said. “Please, Harry. Sit down and join us.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude on your date.”

“Nonsense, Harry. We don’t see you that often. Sit down, please,” Neville insisted.

Harry pulled up a chair to sit at the end of the small table and exchanged a one armed hug with Hannah.

“So tell us, Harry, how are they taking it, the Aurors I mean?” Neville asked.

“As you might expect, some accept it, some aren’t happy, and the rest will wait and see how it goes. They only found out this morning so…” he concluded with a shrug.

“All they need to do is ask any one of the DA to find out just how well you will do, Harry,” Hannah said with a big smile.

“I don’t know, Hannah, but thanks. There are going to be some big changes and that’s hard for some people to accept,” Harry replied.

As they were talking Tom came up to them to see what they would like for dinner. Harry noticed that he was looking tired and not nearly as talkative. When they had placed their orders he shuffled off at less than his usual speed.

“What’s wrong with Tom? He looks done in,” Harry commented.

“A couple of things, as best we can figure out from talking to him, Harry. His health is failing him somewhat and he’s getting on in years.

Plus he knew a lot of the people that fell victim to Voldemort and the Death Eaters. More than a few were regulars in here. Plus all the talk about what's going on in Knockturn Alley has him upset as well. He's even made some comments about selling the Cauldron and retiring," Neville said.

"Really? Wow, won't seem the same without him," Harry replied.

"Well, the Cauldron has had many owners over the centuries but Tom is the third generation in his family to run it. Neville and I have talked about it. I'd love to run the place but we just don't have the money to buy it," Hannah said.

"We?" Harry asked with a crooked smile.

"Yeah, mate," Neville said, blushing. "Hannah and I have an understanding you'd say."

Hannah fixed Neville with a beady stare and said,

"Understand this, Mr. Longbottom. You and I are getting married next summer, yes?" she said severely and then broke into a big smile as she reached across the table to take his hand.

"Congratulation, that's terrific news," Harry said as he shook Neville's free hand and then leaned over to kiss Hannah on the cheek.

"As to the Cauldron, I happen to know that Gringotts has been making arrangements to help get financing for people doing business in Diagon Alley. That's how Angelina was able to get the ice cream shop opened. I believe she dealt with a goblin named Kandak. If you are really serious you should go talk to them."

"Wow, Harry, that's wonderful. Thanks for the information. We wondered how Angelina had managed to do that but we've never gotten around to asking her," Hannah said excitedly.

Tom came out with their dinners about this time and they ate in a decidedly good mood. They talked about Neville's work at Hogwarts. He had done his first lectures and they had gone quite well. They

questioned Harry about his plans and were very enthusiastic about what he outlined for them.

“It’s just amazing, Harry, but I can’t think of anyone better to do what the Minister wants done. You know, my grandmother used to tell me that my mum and dad used to complain about the attitudes that a lot of the Aurors had. They didn’t think that the Aurors and the Ministry were paying attention to the right things. That’s why they wound up in the original Order of the Phoenix,” Neville said, his eyes taking on a slightly haunted look.

They talked some more as they finished their meal. They argued a bit over the check but settled for splitting it. After saying his farewells, Harry headed for the door but when he looked back he noticed that Tom had been waved over and he was sitting at the table talking quietly with the future Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. As he made his way to the Black house he smiled inwardly at the thought of Neville and Hannah getting married. He was very happy for the both of them. He began to think of his situation with Ginny. Ever since the days after Voldemort’s defeat they knew where they were headed together, but Harry thought that it shouldn’t be just taken for granted. An idea began to form in his mind and the more he thought the more he liked it.

The following morning Harry sent a message by owl to Kandak at Gringotts informing him that his friends might be coming to see him about financing for the purchase of the Leaky Cauldron and that the money could come from his assets. In this case however there need not be a silent partnership requirement, just a straight business loan arrangement. Harry considered this a wedding present of sorts. As fortune would have it there had been a message from Ginny the previous evening telling Harry how much she was missing him and congratulating him on his promotion and would he possibly have time for her to visit the following weekend. Her owl was waiting for a response. He happily replied that he would indeed and he was looking forward to her arrival. All in all he was quite happy when he arrived at the Ministry for his second full day as Auror chief.

Around midmorning he was nearing the end of his review of the files when a note fluttered through the doorway and landed on his desk. It

was a summons to the Minister's office. Harry left his office, closing the door behind him and made his way up to the Minister. The witch behind the desk in the reception room waved him on and Harry knocked and was called into the main room. Upon entering the room Harry saw the Minister seated at the conference table with one other wizard, a smallish, middle aged man with a notebook open in front of him.

"Harry, thanks for coming up so quickly," Kingsley Shacklebolt said, his deep voice neutral. "This is Mr. Godfrey Changeborough. He's a reporter with the Daily Prophet."

At the naming of one of Harry's historic nemeses his face took a decidedly wooden set that didn't go unnoticed.

"Yes, I understand your reaction, Mr. Potter and it's well founded," the little wizard said, a bit nervously. "The Prophet has rarely proven to be a friend of yours. I'm hoping we can get past that for the moment. There is a great deal of interest in the community about the changes being implemented by the Minister and what you are doing is very much at the heart of it. I was hoping to ask you a few questions so that we can inform our readers."

Harry looked at the Minister who gave a barely perceptible nod. Harry turned his gaze back to the reporter.

"You're right that the Prophet and I are not exactly on good terms, Mr. Changeborough. But the people do need to know what we are doing here on their behalf. But understand that I expect what I say to be reported truthfully and accurately. If not, you and I are going to have some problems," Harry said quietly.

"Of course, Mr. Potter, of course," the reporter said quickly.

Harry took a seat across from Changeborough and folded his hands on the table top. He gave the man a nod to signal him to start.

"Now, Mr. Potter. Could you briefly describe what changes you are planning to implement within the Aurors' department?"

Harry responded with a cursory overview of the reorganization putting special emphasis on the Patrollers and what he hoped to accomplish for the average witch or wizard.

“How are you intending to recruit these newer, shall we say, entry level witches and wizards?”

“I was planning on placing an ad in the Prophet, in fact, announcing open try outs. With the Minister’s permission I was going to request that the same office that administers the OWL and NEWT exams would do likewise for these try outs. Candidates will be tested to determine if they possess the minimum standards of magical capability, personality and emotional stability to provide policing while also being the day to day face of the Ministry to most of the magical community.”

Harry looked to the Minister who responded,

“I’ll have the testing director talk to you this afternoon, Potter.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Just so you understand, Mr. Changeborough, it is my intention to have all matters of magical law enforcement to be unified under one office, headed by Mr. Potter,” the Minister said. “In the past, the piecemeal approach with different offices dealing with different aspects and incidents has resulted in, well, what we’ve all just lived through the last few years. It needs to change and it will change.”

“I see, well thank you for the clarification. Now, getting back to you, Mr. Potter. Some might consider you to be a bit young to be the head of such an important government office. How would you respond to that?”

“I’d say that from a point of view of mere years they’re probably right. I only turned twenty this past July. However, most of what I’ve done seems to have happened before I was old enough. My first run in with Voldemort certainly, but also I was the youngest Seeker at Hogwarts in over one hundred years. I had three more run ins with Voldemort before I was sixteen. And my last before I was eighteen. Based on

my experiences I'm a lot older than I look," Harry finished, his face expressionless.

"Yes, Yes. Lastly Mr. Potter, is there anything that you would like to say to the magical community regarding your efforts here?" the reporter asked.

"To everyone in the magical community, we are here to serve you. The combined efforts of all elements of magical law enforcement will be made with that single concept in mind. I ask you for your patience as we make the changes necessary and for your participation in building an organization that will make us all proud. Details for the try outs will be posted as soon as possible."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Potter. I appreciate you taking time from your busy schedule to talk to me," the reporter said.

"You're welcome," Harry replied then turned to the Minister. "Do you need me for anything else here, sir?"

"That's all for now, Potter. Thank you."

Harry nodded, stood and with a nod to the reporter walked out of the Minister's office. On his way back down to his office, he bumped into Hermione, literally. She was hurrying down an intersecting corridor and ran into Harry's side.

"Harry! Oh, I am sorry but I was on my way down to see you. I got a note back from Hagrid. He says he's talked to some of the Centaurs and although they are very suspicious they would talk to the rest and give us an answer. No indication of when, though," she said all out breath.

"Not surprising, really," Harry said with a little laugh. "They can move pretty fast when they're upset but ask them to think on something and they're as slow as the stars they're always looking at."

"Hmm, you're probably right but it's a start of sorts I guess," Hermione replied thoughtfully.

"I'm curious though, Hermione. Doesn't the Department of Regulation of Magical Creatures have offices that deal with the different other magical races? Wouldn't they have ways of making contact?"

"There are offices for the Goblins and Centaurs. But there's been so much bad feelings between us and the Goblins that the official relationship is very strained. As far as the Centaurs go, I don't think there has ever been any official contact made. And they don't even consider the house elves worth considering. That's one of the reasons I'm over here, it's almost like starting over," Hermione said.

"I have someone I think might be able to help with the Goblins. Maybe Kreacher knows of a way to talk to the house elves as a whole, but I can't imagine what it might be. I'm heading to Diagon Alley for lunch so I'll see what I can find out for you about the Goblins," Harry said.

"Ok, thanks, Harry. Gotta run," Hermione said as she moved off at high speed.

Harry watched as his friend quickly disappeared down the corridor, smiling at her energy and enthusiasm. He made his way to his office, checked for any further messages and then made his way to the lobby where he Disapparated to a fairly secluded spot near Gringotts. His first stop was the jewelry shop that had been robbed recently. He stepped in and looking around for the owner.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. So good to see you again. Is this visit personal or professional?" the wizard shopkeeper asked.

"A bit of both. Have you had any more trouble since the day you were robbed?" Harry asked.

"No, none at all. And just yesterday, I received a message that the case of the thief has been dealt with and I can come and claim my stolen property. I just need to find a little time to pop over and pick it up."

"That's great. As to the personal, I'd like to discuss something with you if I could," Harry said.

"Why, of course. Anything I can do for you, Mr. Potter, will be my pleasure."

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later that Harry left the jewelry shop with a very satisfied smile on his face. His next stop was Gringotts. As usual the doormen bowed him in and a clerk hurried up to greet him.

"Good day, Mr. Potter. How may the bank be of service to you today?"

"I was wondering if I could speak to Mr. Kandak," Harry said.

"I'll just go and see if he is available, excuse me please," the little Goblin replied.

Harry stood quietly, looking around the ornate lobby, nodding and smiling a bit if he made eye contact with anyone. A few minutes passed and then Harry saw the elderly Goblin that he had dealt with often hurrying toward him.

"Mr. Potter. Very good to see you again, sir. I understand you wished to see me?"

"Yes, Kandak. Is there somewhere we could speak privately? It's not really bank business but I thought you might be able to help me," Harry said quietly.

"Certainly. Please follow me."

The elderly Goblin led Harry down a side corridor to a heavily carved wooden door that opened to a moderately sized but severely plain office. A simple desk with a chair on either side sat in the center of the room, with plain bookshelves on both sides and a single high window. Kandak gestured for Harry to take the one chair as he settled himself into the well worn one behind the desk.

"Now, sir. How may I be of help to you? Oh, and may I offer my congratulations on your recent good fortune?"

“Thank you and that good fortune has a bearing on my request. As you may have heard the Minister has made some serious efforts at reorganizing the Ministry of Magic. A major change has been shifting the responsibility for legal relations for all the magical races to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Goblins, Centaurs and house elves will no longer be grouped with other magical creatures. The Minister and Director want to put all the magical races on an equal footing, at least as far as the law is concerned.”

Kandak’s face remained passive but Harry could see his hands tighten as they were clasped together in front of him on the desk.

“Now, I’m not going to insult your intelligence and tell you that this is going to make everything wonderful and erase all the bad feelings that have existed over the centuries but at least it’s a start. Do you remember the day I mentioned to you that a strong voice for equal treatment was coming to the Ministry?”

“Yes, Mr. Potter, I do recall that day,” the Goblin replied.

“Well, that voice is being heard and she’s been appointed as a special assistant to the Director of Magical Law Enforcement with the assignment to make contact with, well, representatives of the various magical races to begin a useful dialogue. Her name is Hermione Granger and she’s a very good friend of mine.”

“I am aware of the name, Mr. Potter. Usually in concert with your own. If she is a trusted friend of yours then she is a being worthy of trust,” Kandak said thoughtfully.

“I’ve trusted her with my life on more occasions than I care to think about. My question to you is, can you help put her in contact with influential members of the Goblin community?” Harry asked.

“If you can vouch for the trust and sincerity of the others involved in this, I believe I can do that, Mr. Potter.”

“Thank you, Kandak. I can’t make any promises about where this will lead but I think it’s an opportunity we can’t let get away from us,” Harry said.

“Indeed, sir. Is there any other service we can provide for you today?”

“Just being curious. Has anyone contacted you about that matter I owed you about?”

“Yes, indeed. Our business loan department reported an appointment has been made for this Friday, sir.”

“That’s great. Well, I better be getting back to work. Thank you for all your help,” Harry said as he stood.

“You are most welcome, sir, and it is my pleasure to assist you in your many endeavors,” the elderly Goblin replied. “I will contact you as soon as I have made arrangements.”

“Great, thanks again and good bye for now,” Harry said as he made his way to the large double doors.

Kandak watched as Harry made his way to the door, the Goblins eyes fixed on the back of the young man he had come to respect and admire. And as much as it could be said for the usually stern expression that was so natural to a member of his race, he eyes had a wistful, expectant look to them. With his long fingered hands clasped behind his back, the Goblin walked back to his office.

Harry walked along the narrow confines of Diagon Alley, looking into shops, exchanging greetings with various witches and wizards, many of whom apparently knew Harry although he didn’t know them. As he walked past Angelina’s Ice Cream Haven, he stopped to look in and caught the eye of the tall, dark skinned proprietress. She broke into a big smile as she was dishing up a customers request.

“Harry, come in, please,” Angelina called out.

Harry stepped into the shop which had only a few customers, which was to be expected on a weekday in early fall. Angelina had done a

great job of decorating the shop, with the bright paint, fancifully designed tables and chairs in almost gossamer wrought iron. She had found someone to paint small renderings of various magical and mythical creatures along the walls. He hadn't noticed those before. After finishing serving the last customer, Angelina hurried out from behind the counter.

"Harry, it's so good to see you, it seems like months," she said with a big smile as she wrapped her long arms around him in a tight hug.

For not the first time, Harry wondered what made him so huggable, but after so many years of emotional neglect he had come to savor every one, so he returned the gesture with one of his own.

"I think it's been about a month, Angelina. Dinner at the Burrow, remember?" Harry said as they stood back from each other.

"It seems longer. Can you sit a minute?"

"Sure, I can chalk it up to improving community relations," he said with a smirk.

"Yes, your promotion," she said as they pulled out chairs and sat down. "That's so bloody brilliant, Harry. You know, back at Hogwarts we all thought you were going to do big things, just didn't know it would happen so fast."

Harry could only smile and shrug his customary shrug.

"So, how are things going here? Are you happy?" he said earnestly.

"Yes, I am, Harry. I really like this. George always talks about how much fun he has with the customers and this is the same kind of store. Buying something you want to enjoy, not just something you need. Even in this weather the business is pretty good during the week and it really gets busy on Saturdays. I have two weekend workers now. Your money is in good hands I think, Harry."

"I wasn't concerned about the money, Angelina. I was asking about you," he said quietly.

"I know you were, Harry," she said with a soft, knowing smile. "But business is business after all," she said, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand.

"I don't remember these paintings on the wall, Angelina," Harry said to change the subject. "When did you have that done?"

"Aren't they brilliant, Harry? Had it done this summer. A friend of yours did them for me," she said with a mischievous grin.

"Who?"

"Abigail Westwood."

"Abigail did these?" Harry asked, astounded.

"Yup," Angelina replied. "Back in the spring I mentioned to Ginny that I was thinking of doing something to spruce up the blank walls. I was thinking of some sort of mural or characters or something and Ginny mentioned what a good artist Abigail was. Something about an owl message she had gotten from Abigail that showed you and Ginny flying on your brooms. She showed me and it was amazing. So I contacted her up at Hogwarts and she wound up here a lot during the summer, doing these."

"Wow, I wish I had known. I haven't seen her since my last visit to Hogwarts. But I'll be up there again in a while," he said obviously disappointed that he had missed seeing her over the summer.

"Well, you may have missed seeing her, but she didn't miss seeing you. Every time she was here working on the walls, she'd tell me what you were up to. I guess I should have mentioned it to you, Harry, but you seemed so busy I didn't want to distract you. Sorry."

"No need to be sorry, Angelina. Everything is pretty much a whirlwind at the moment," he said with a smile. "How are the wedding plans coming together?"

“Pretty much set. Last weekend in May at the Burrow. Hopefully it won’t be as eventful as Bill and Fleur’s was,” she said with a grimace.

Harry had a quick flash back on how the wedding started out so nicely only to end in such chaos.

“Only thing you’ll have to worry about is the weather,” he said with a smile.

“So, Harry, that will make you my, what, unofficially adopted brother-in-law?” she said playfully.

“Something like that, I guess. Whatever it’s called, we’ll be family. Not that we aren’t already,” he said quietly.

Angelina smiled again and then saw a young witch standing at the counter.

“Well, brother of mine, I guess I should let you get back to your busy day and I’ll get back to my customers.”

Harry nodded and they both stood up, Angelina giving him another heartfelt hug. She watched him as he left the shop and returned the wave he offered from beyond the front window. She smiled again, shook her head and returned to the counter to serve up another smile on a cone.

Harry made his way from the ice cream store to the entrance to the Cauldron and had a simple meal in a quiet corner. All in all it had been a good morning. He wondered how the article was going to work out but he felt at least this time the Prophet had more to lose if they tried to mess him about so he didn’t let it concern him, much. Then it was back to the Ministry to continue his work of revamping law enforcement in the magical community.

The rest of the week passed quickly. There was still no word from the Centaurs. They were probably still looking for their answers in the stars. Kandak had sent a message on Friday morning indicating that progress was being made but it would likely be a few weeks before anything concrete could be arranged. Harry figured after centuries of

discord, a few weeks were well worth the wait. Hermione agreed. Surprisingly, Harry had received only two transfer requests and one resignation from the Aurors. He didn't know if any of these three was the curse thrower but he wasn't going to dwell on it. He sat in on a meeting of the fledgling Investigation Unit and despite some awkwardness at the start, things seem to be heading in a good direction. Likewise he had his first contact with the Director of testing and the elderly witch was more than eager to help Harry with his plans. She had lived through all the Voldemort years, had been impressed by Harry with the results of his OWLs and NEWTs, not to mention his other accomplishments and was pleased to be able to participate in some way with his latest enterprise. She felt they could have something ready for mid November, just over a month away.

By the end of the day on Friday, Harry was more than anxious to see Ginny. He decided he would work late to try and stave off any over-excitement and to make him tired enough to fall asleep as soon as he got home. It was a good plan but failed miserably. He was indeed tired by the time he got home but the anticipation over what he had planned for the next day didn't allow his mind to shut down enough to let him fall off to sleep. It was well after midnight and he was still in his comfy chair in his study flipping through the pages of one of the rare books of magic that he had finally been able to acquire. Kreacher was standing in the open doorway watching his master and knowing he needed his sleep. An odd look passed over his face and he raised a finger and waved it briefly. The costly book came to rest in Harry's lap as his head drooped. Kreacher walked in and removed the book and placed it on his master's desk. He then placed a small blanket across Harry's lap and left the room to find his own rest for the night.

When Harry awoke the next morning he was feeling a bit stiff from having slept sitting up but all in all he felt quite refreshed. After showering and dressing he ate the excellent breakfast Kreacher had waiting for him. He was just finishing up his last cup of tea when the knocker on the door banged. Kreacher was there in a flash and Harry could hear him say,

"Welcome, Mistress Ginny. Master Harry is in the kitchen."

“Thanks, Kreacher,” came the voice of which he could never hear enough.

He barely had time to get up and away from the table when a red headed blur burst into the kitchen and had him wrapped in a tight warm embrace.

“Oh, Harry, I’ve missed you so much, sweetheart.”

Nothing was said for the next few minutes as their lips were otherwise occupied, not surprisingly in the same task. When they finally surfaced for air Harry was looking down into the face that never failed to send a thrill through him.

“Hello, love. I’ve missed you, too. Have you had your breakfast yet?”

“Yes I have, but I could do with another cup of tea if you have any left.”

Harry pulled out a chair for her as she slid off her coat. She sat down and Harry poured her a cup from the pot on the table. He still had some left so he chose to sip it slowly as Ginny put the finishing touches on her’s and then took the first sip.

“Ah, that’s the thing. It’s a bit chilly out there today, my dear. So, do you have any plans for us or are we just going to knock about today.”

“I thought we’d do a little shopping at Diagon Alley. How does that sound?” Harry asked.

“It sounds great. What girl would turn down the opportunity to shop?” she said with an impish grin.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later that Harry and Ginny walked hand in hand down the streets of London towards the Leaky Cauldron. Ginny was looking around having spent very little time amongst muggles. She leaned toward Harry.

“They sure are a noisy bunch, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are. But I guess it keeps them from noticing what we don't want them to notice.”

They reached the Cauldron and walked inside. At mid morning it was still a bit on the quiet side but a few people turned and looked and waved to the young couple as they walked through the tap room on the way to the back exit. In a few minutes they were standing at the head of Diagon Alley on a cool, sunny fall day. They strolled hand in hand looking in windows, going into this shop or that. Two must-stops were of course Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and the Quidditch Supply Store. They spent about a half hour in each, in the first talking with George about how things were going, new products and so on and the other admiring the brooms and engaging in a detailed discussion with the shop owner and two customers on the virtues of the Firebolt and Firebolt II. They concluded with Harry and Ginny signing autographs and posing for pictures. Harry appeared good natured about it but when they left the store Ginny could sense his embarrassment.

“Why does that bother you so much, Harry?”

“I don't know, Ginny. I just don't feel comfortable having a fuss made over me like that,” Harry said, his cheeks still showing some rosiness.

“Harry, my love, try to remember something. It's not just that you are the famous Harry Potter, Quidditch King and defeater of evil demons. You're Harry Potter who people genuinely like and who goes out of his way to be nice to them and they know that and respond. Remember all that business about friends and family you've never met? Well, there they are and they want to feel like they were your friend or a member of your family, if only for a short time talking Quidditch in a shop. Think of it that way and maybe it won't be so embarrassing, okay, sweetie?”

Harry looked down at his favorite red head, or any head for that matter, and smiled.

“Once again, I have to marvel at your wisdom, my love,” he said with a smile.

She smiled back and pulled him down for a quick kiss. By this time they were coming up on the jewelry store. Harry looked down at Ginny and said,

“Have you ever been in here, Ginny?”

“Harry, when would I have had the money to even think of looking in there? Why do you ask?”

“This is the shop where that smash and grab thief stole the gold chains that time. Why don’t we pop in and see how things are going?” Harry said, trying to sound as nonchalant as he could.

“Ok, Harry. It might be fun to look around,” she said.

They stepped through the door and the proprietor looked up from his work of arranging a counter display and said,

“Well, Mr. Potter. So good to see you.”

“Thanks, I hope everything is going ok with you?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. I was able to retrieve the stolen items from the Ministry yesterday and the breakage was easy enough to repair. Is the young lady one of the new Aurors we’ve been hearing about?”

“Oh, no. This is my girlfriend, Ms. Ginny Weasley,” Harry said.

“Ah, the stand out chaser from the Holyhead Harpies. It’s an honour Ms. Weasley. I follow Quidditch very closely, I do. I was keeper for the Hufflepuff team my sixth and seventh year,” the jeweler said.

Ginny looked a bit flustered but very pleased at the recognition and moved forward to shake the jeweler’s hand when her eyes fell across the display that he had been working on. It contained a number of rings containing various colors of precious gems including diamonds, rubies and emeralds. Her eyes went very wide as she bent a little closer to study them.

"Is there anything the lady would like to look at," the wizard asked, a small smile on his face.

"Oh, no, I was just admiring them is all. I couldn't even begin to think of something like these," Ginny said a little breathlessly.

"Please, young lady. It would be my pleasure to have you look at them. No need to feel obligated in any way."

"Go ahead, Ginny. It can't hurt to look," Harry said over the top of Ginny's head looking at the jeweler.

"They are so beautiful, Harry. Look, this diamond looks exactly like the one that Bill gave to Fleur when they got engaged," she said excitedly.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Bill Weasley and the stunning French girl. I remember them well. They still stop by now and again. You have a very good eye, Ms. Weasley. That is the very same cut of stone although this one is a tad larger if I remember correctly."

Ginny's eyes continued to move slowly over the different rings and gemstones until she let out a startled exclamation.

"Oh my goodness, Harry. Look at this one," she said in a rush.

"What have you got there, Ginny?" Harry asked calmly.

"This one, the emerald. It's the exact same color as your eyes. See?"

"Hold it up for me to see, will you, love?"

"Yes," the jeweler said, "hold it up and let's see if they are indeed a match."

Hesitantly Ginny picked up the ring with the bright green stone and she held it up just to the side of Harry's head and looked back and forth as he held his eyes on her face.

“My gosh, Harry, it’s exactly the same color,” she said as she turned her head over her shoulder to the jeweler. “Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, indeed. You have a fine eye for color, Ms. Weasley.”

“Let me have a look,” Harry said as he took the ring from Ginny’s right hand as he took hold of her left. “Yes, it does seem to look the same. Of course I’m going by memory from what I see in the mirror in the morning. Let’s take another look though.”

Deftly Harry held up Ginny’s left hand so that the fingers were extended palm down and just as deftly slipped the slightly oversized ring onto the third finger. Ginny gasped and looked at her hand then up into Harry’s face, her eyes wide.

“Ginny Weasley, will you marry me?” was all Harry said.

Ginny’s eyes popped wider then began to mist over. Her mouth moved but nothing came out. She began to nod and with her free right hand pulled Harry’s head down and buried her face in his shoulder. In a moment, Harry could hear small gasped ‘yes’s and then she pulled away, brought both hands around his neck and pulled him down to kiss him long and lovingly, all the while the jeweler standing behind the counter smiling fit to split his face. When the couple separated he said,

“I have seen this done many times and many ways over the years but I’ve never grown tired of it. Congratulations to you both. I did notice that it slipped a bit freely onto your finger, Ms. Weasley. If I may?” he said as he held out his hand.

Ginny hesitated then reluctantly held out her hand so the jeweler could slip it off her finger.

“A moment if you please,” as he turned to his workbench behind the counter.

Ginny put her arms around Harry’s waist and held him tightly as he did likewise. After a few moments the jeweler turned and handed Harry the ring.

"I believe that should do it," he said

Once more Harry took Ginny's left hand and slid the ring onto her finger, feeling the snug fit. She once more pushed up against Harry and snuggled her face into his chest. Then she looked up at him and said,

"But Harry, we don't even know how much it is?"

"I do. I saw it when I was last here about the robbery. This wasn't quite as spontaneous as it seemed," Harry said quietly, smiling.

"But how did you know that I would pick this one?" she said breathlessly.

"I didn't know, but I had hoped, and sometimes hope is enough."

Her lower lip quivered and her eyes began to stream tears as she once more buried her face in his chest. Harry smiled at the jeweler.

"I think were all settled here, aren't we?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir. Gringotts sent a receipt for the transfer just this morning. You are both welcome back anytime and any cleaning or adjustment for the ring is free of charge."

"Thank you," Harry replied.

"Oh, no, Mr. Potter. Thank you, for everything."

With a last smile and thank you from the happy couple, Harry and Ginny walked arm and arm out of the shop. Ginny paused to look at the ring in the midday sun. She smiled and looked up at Harry.

"The same color and the same sparkle," she said happily.

Harry gave her a squeeze and they proceeded up the Alley toward their final planned stop of the day, Angelina's. As they entered the shop Harry could see that business was indeed brisk and Angelina

and the two weekend assistants were busy dishing up various frozen delicacies for a small crowd. Harry and Ginny, still holding each other tightly stood toward the back of the shop. Something must have tugged at Angelina's awareness for as she stood up straight to hand a dish of vanilla over the counter she looked directly at Harry and Ginny, her look questioning. With a megawatt smile Ginny held up her left hand, palm inward, fingers pointed to the ceiling. The tall, dark skinned girl's eyes went wide and Ginny nodded vigorously. Angelina let out a squeal that brought everyone up short as she dashed around the end of the counter and made her way around the edge of the small crowd of customers. She slid to a stop just short of the happy couple and stammered out,

"When?"

"Just now," Ginny replied.

"Where?"

"The jewelers down near Gringotts."

"Let me see, let me see."

Ginny held out her hand and Angelina looked at the bright green gem as it gleamed on Ginny's finger, then she looked at Harry's face.

"It's a perfect match," Angelina said breathlessly.

"Yes, we are," Harry said quietly.

Angelina nodded, laughed and then threw her long arms around the two of them, squeezing hard. Then she let go of Harry and pulled Ginny to her and they began to do the 'happy girl two step' which primarily involved jumping up and down together in a hug accompanied by squeals of laughter and crying, sometimes simultaneously. After they ran out of gas, they stopped and Angelina turned to the crowd with one arm still draped around Ginny's shoulders.

“Hey, everybody. Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley are officially engaged,” she called out.

A number of customers came up and offered congratulations and well wishes. Harry and Ginny both had to dodge a few wayward ice cream cones but all in all they emerged unscathed. They were finally able to extricate themselves from the crowd after promising Angelina that they would meet her and George at the Leaky Cauldron for dinner at six. They still hadn't had lunch so after leaving the ice cream parlor they stood on the pavement and thought about where to go.

“Harry, we should really go see Mum and Dad. They'll be thrilled and we'll have a chance to relax before dinner. What do you think?” Ginny said.

“Sounds like a great idea, Ginny, besides it means a free lunch,” Harry said with a smile.

“Oh, you are so bad, Harry,” she replied with a laugh. “See you in the backyard, sweetheart.”

With that she popped out of view. Harry counted to ten and followed, appearing in the backyard of the Burrow. Ginny was making her way to the house and Harry hurried to catch her up. Just as she got to the kitchen door Harry came up behind her and gave her a quick hug as she pushed open the door.

“MUM!” she yelled out. “Are you home?”

“Ginny, I wasn't expecting to see you this weekend. What a pleasant surprise,” Mrs. Weasley said as she came into the kitchen from the living room.

“And Harry. Is everything all right, children?” she said a bit concerned.

“It couldn't be any better, Mum,” Ginny said as she held up her left hand as she had in the ice cream parlor.

Mrs. Weasley looked stunned. Her eyes moved from her daughter to Harry and back again. They both nodded and smiled. She let out a

scream that could have been heard on the other side of Ottery St. Catchpole. She rushed forward and swept them up in a hug that would have done a mother grizzly bear proud. She was crying and babbling and the best that either Harry or Ginny could do was rub her back and smile at each other. After a few moments Mr. Weasley came crashing through the back door shouting,

“What is it? Why are you screaming, Molly?” Arthur Weasley called out.

“Oh, Arthur...it’s, it’s, it’s...” and she broke down in tears again.

“Ginny, Harry, what’s going on here?”

“Sorry, Dad, Mum’s a little excited right now,” Ginny said from the vicinity of Harry’s shoulder. “Harry and I are engaged, Dad,” and she held up her left hand.

“Oh, my word, this is fantastic,” Mr. Weasley said loudly and added his two arms to the hug fest.

“Mum, Dad, easy please. We need some air here,” Ginny said from the middle of the impromptu rugby scrum.

Laughing and with a few tears of his own, Mr. Weasley pulled back and helped unwrap the children from Molly Weasley’s grasp.

“Come on, Molly. Let the children catch their breath and tell us all about it,” Arthur said as he started to lead her into the living room.

The two couples took seats in the expanded living room, one pair on one couch and the other, younger couple perched on the edge of a love seat.

“So you two, give us the details,” Mr. Weasley said as his wife was still sniffing and trying to compose herself.

“Well, Dad,” Ginny began. “Harry and I had planned on spending the day together and we went to Diagon Alley to walk about, window shop, stop in and see George and Angelina and have some lunch.

Well, Mr. Wonderful here lures me into the jewelers that's by Gringotts under the pretense of checking up on a robbery that had taken place," Ginny said with an impish grin. "He then coaxed me into examining some very nice but horribly expensive rings. One of them was this positively gorgeous emerald that matched the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen and as I held it up to compare the two, he used some magical slight of hand to slip it on my finger and right then and there he proposed to me. What could I do but say yes."

Mrs. Weasley didn't know whether to laugh or cry so she did a bit of both. Mr. Weasley had no such problem and he was chuckling as he looked at his daughter then to Harry's face full of mock outrage.

"My dear daughter. I'm sure it was much more romantic than that."

"Oh, I'm just teasing, Dad. It was the most beautiful thing in the world. But if I tried to tell you seriously I'd be as big a basket case as Mum is," Ginny replied, her eyes filling up.

"Well, for the both of us, congratulations and our blessings to you both. I'm not going to be the one to ask for plans. I'll leave that up to your mother once she's pulled herself together. But I think I'll go round up those of the family that I can," he said looking at the grandfather clock that didn't tell time but told where all the members of the family were.

It always made Harry feel good to see his face up there, currently pointing to the marker that read 'home'. He could see that Bill and Fleur were at their home, George at the store, Ron at Hogsmeade, Charlie was somewhere in the Scottish Highlands working on his research project. Percy was in London. Fred's 'hand' had been taken down and was set in a small wooden frame next to the clock.

"I'll be back in a little while, everyone. Children, keep an eye on your mother," he said with a grin then popped out of sight.

Ginny got up and went and sat next to her mother, wrapping her arms around her. She looked back at Harry and smiled. After a few moments Mrs. Weasley gave a big sniff and looked at the two of them.

“Well, my dears. You’ve given me a right shock, but a very happy one. I always thought this day would come but it’s still so exciting. But I’m forgetting myself. Have you two thought to have lunch with all this?” she asked.

“Well, we thought this is the best place in the world to be fed, so...” Harry said with a crooked smile.

Molly Weasley laughed, shook her head and got up from the couch. She bustled into the kitchen and began gathering items together to make a quick lunch.

“Come in here, you two. Free lunches are served in the kitchen.”

Harry got up and offered his hand to his bride to be and walked with her into the now spacious kitchen and sat at the big table. By the time their meal was ready popping sounds were heard in the yard and the first one through the door was Fleur, squealing excitedly as she rushed toward the table. Ginny bounced up and Harry and Mrs. Weasley were treated to a repeat performance of the ‘happy girls dance’. Bill walked in with an amused grin on his face and came up to Harry and shook his hand and offered his congratulations. After a few moments, Ginny and Fleur let go of each other and the French beauty swept up to Harry and wrapped him tightly in her slender arms and kissed him warmly on each cheek and then his forehead.

“Congratulations, mon frere. I am more ‘appy then I can say. I weesh you both all the love and ‘appiness een the world. Especially to you, ‘arry. You deserve eet more then anyone.”

Harry smiled back at her and for the first time anyone could remember he leaned forward and kissed her on each of her cheeks. To everyone’s amazement Fleur blushed and gave a girlish giggle.

“Well, mon ami, that took you long eenough,” she said with another giggle.

They all sat down at the table and shared in the lunch that Mrs. Weasley had prepared. After about a half an hour Mr. Weasley returned. He informed them that Ron wouldn’t be able to get away

until closing; Charlie would be along in about half an hour and George would talk to Angelina to see if they wanted to come along or have everyone go to the Cauldron as planned.

“Oh, shoot, that’s right. Angelina wanted us to meet them for dinner at the Cauldron at six,” Ginny said.

“She didn’t know we’d be coming here, Ginny. We didn’t know we’d be coming here for that matter. We’ll just see what the afternoon brings,” Harry said.

“Well everyone, why don’t we move out of the kitchen and make use of the lovely, large living room someone so thoughtfully provided for us,” Mrs. Weasley said with a mischievous smile.

Harry blushed a bit, then laughed and taking Ginny by the hand lead them into the living room. As the afternoon passed, various family members began to arrive. Charlie Weasley came in wearing his outdoor gear which showed some heavy singe marks. His research was still a secret but the evidence bespoke dragons were involved. Shortly after five o’clock Ron came through the kitchen door at a run and caught Harry up in a bear hug that had them both laughing. Once they settled down, Harry looked at his first and still best friend and said,

“You’ll be the best man, won’t you, Ron?”

“Of course, Harry, what are best mates for?” he said with a smile.

A few minutes later George came through the door and said,

“Hey, everyone. We decided we’d join you here for a free dinner,” he laughed. “Angelina will be along in a bit, she had some cleaning up to do.”

“And you didn’t stay to help her, George?” Mrs. Weasley said critically.

“I tried, Mum, but she pushed me out. Said she was worried someone would come to the Cauldron looking for us,” he replied, his face a mask of innocent concern.

“And I’m sure you protested loudly as she pushed you out the door,” his mum countered, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

“No way, Mum. I never argue with a woman. Learned that from you years ago,” George laughed again.

Mrs. Weasley scowled at her son as he came up to offer his congratulations to Harry and Ginny. Angelina joined the festivities shortly before six and Percy was the last to arrive shortly thereafter. He did apologize that he wouldn’t be able to stay long since he had a previous engagement for eight o’clock back in London. Mrs. Weasley had been busy during the afternoon in between conversations and welcomes and by six thirty everyone was helping themselves to a number of dishes served buffet style. Ginny had spent a great deal of time talking with Fleur, her mother and Angelina, when she arrived, about ideas for the wedding. The idea of a double wedding was floated but Ginny shot that down immediately.

“No way. Angelina deserves her own special day and so do I,” she said firmly.

The men’s discussion ranged from where the two would live, juggling the two careers, honeymoon destinations, all of which lasted for perhaps a quarter hour and then on to more important things like Quidditch, Harry’s job, what was going on at Diagon Alley and of course, more Quidditch. Harry was pleased to learn that the Gryffindor team was doing well and had a decent lead for the Cup.

“Shame of it is, Harry, after your last year, it’s all gotten pretty dull. No unbelievable catches, no spectacular crashes. You raised the bar and every match gets compared to one of yours. You’re getting to be known as Almost Harry Potter,” Bill said with a laugh.

“Almost? What’s that supposed to mean,” Harry asked, puzzled.

“Match and post match commentary is filled with things like “that was an almost Harry Potter catch” or “that seeker has almost Harry Potter like moves”, Bill replied.

Harry could only smile a little and shrug. The Bill got a bit more serious and asked,

“When do you think you’d be able to find some time to come up for a lecture, Harry? I’m getting a lot of questions.”

“Well, on the one hand I’m pretty busy with the reorganization, Bill, but on the other in a way I’m almost my own boss and I don’t have to worry about any complaints about me interrupting my training so let’s think about it. What do you say to Tuesday, week after this one coming up?”

“That’d be great, Harry. Your promotion to Chief was big news at Hogwarts,” Bill replied.

“How’d they find out so fast?” Harry asked.

“Your biggest and smallest fan let everyone know almost before it happened,” the elder Weasley brother grinned.

“Abigail?”

“Abigail. It happened I had her class late that morning and she came tearing in shouting ‘Mr. Potter is Auror Chief’ so loud it echoed off the walls. She was fit to burst she was so happy for you.”

“That probably means our engagement is old news up there by now,” Harry said with a laugh.

“Most likely,” Bill said.

It was around ten thirty when Ginny looked over at Harry and motioned toward the door with her head. He nodded and stood up.

“I don’t want to be rude but it’s been a long and exciting day. I think it’s time to be heading back to London.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather stay over tonight, Harry? You know you’re always welcome,” Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Thanks, Mum. But I think I'll head back. Ginny? Are you staying or coming too?"

"I'll come along, Harry. I'll need to head back early tomorrow, we have a major practice starting on Monday morning," Ginny said.

"Ok, dears," Mrs. Weasley said as she came up and gave her 'son' and her daughter warm hugs. "You've given us wonderful news today and we'll have to sit down soon and make plans."

"Yes, Mum," the two replied together, smiling.

Harry and Ginny then walked out hand and hand, then they Disapparated back to the front stoop of the London Black house. Harry reached for the knocker but the door swung open as Kreacher's head appeared around the door.

"Welcome home, Master Harry, Mistress Ginny," the house elf said.

"Thanks, Kreacher. Sorry I didn't let you know but we were at the Burrow celebrating."

"Master Harry needs not to apologize and Kreacher is most happy that Mistress Ginny will soon be Kreacher's true Mistress," the elf said with a small smile.

"How did you know that?" Harry asked.

"House elves have their ways, Master Harry. Kreacher was told by Hogwarts house elves who heard it from a little girl who ran through the halls of the school yelling about Master Harry and Mistress Ginny."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other and said together,

"Abigail," and then laughed.

The couple walked into the foyer and handed Kreacher their coats. Harry then led Ginny into the rarely used parlor where they could sit down on a small couch. Ginny was pressed up close to Harry's side

and she held her left hand out in front of her, admiring the way the lamp light reflected off the bright green emerald. She sighed and let her head come to rest on Harry's shoulder and she said slowly,

"Mrs. Harry Potter. I like the way that sounds," she said in a dreamy voice.

"I love the way it sounds and I love you, Ms. Ginny Weasley," Harry replied.

Ginny looked up at him and let one hand slide around his neck to pull his face down to hers. Their lips met and remained locked together for some time. As they pulled apart Harry had to catch his breath. He looked at his bride to be and said,

"I guess you're going to have to head back tonight?"

"No, Harry, I don't plan on going back to Holyhead tonight," she said in a soft, low voice that struck a chord in Harry.

"Oh, then I better have Kreacher get the guest room set up for you."

"No, Harry, we don't need the guest room set up for me tonight," she said in a tone that made the back of Harry's neck tingle.

"Um, you're not going to Holyhead and you don't need the guest room so where..." he faltered to a stop as he gazed into the eyes of his hearts greatest desire.

Ginny simply nodded and then stood up and held her hand out to Harry. He took it and let her pull him up off the couch. They left the parlor, their arms around each other and as they walked up the stairs to the second floor they kept their eyes locked on each other. They didn't even notice that Kreacher was standing in the doorway leading into the foyer from the corridor where he could watch them finish their climb up the staircase and then disappear down the upper corridor. His smile was wide as he turned and made his way to his sleep basket.

Harry's Future, Part 8

A knock on the door pulled Harry out of his reverie. While his eyes had been fixed on the open file folder on his desk, his mind was elsewhere. The events of the weekend just past were playing over and over again in his mind. His proposal to Ginny, her acceptance and the day long series of congratulations and well-wishes kept a slight smile on his face. But this was nothing compared to the feelings that swirled through him as he recalled the first night that he and Ginny had spent together. A night that lasted well into the next morning. It was all so, well, for a lack of a better word, magical. But now he had to put those thoughts aside and concentrate on the matters at hand. He looked up at the door and said,

"Come on in."

The door swung open and Milligan, the newly appointed leader of the newly established Magical Investigation Unit, or MIU, stepped in.

"Do you have a few minutes, sir? I have some information you might want to know about."

"Sure, have a seat," Harry replied.

Milligan was carrying a folder of his own and he laid it on the desk in front of Harry as he sat down.

"It seems that the fears of the Diagon Alley shop owners are not unwarranted. Five businesses in Knockturn Alley have changed hands in the past few weeks. In at least two cases that we can find, the previous owner or owners have disappeared since the change. What we can't tell is whether it's because of foul play or they just took the money and moved somewhere, but there's no trace of them."

"Do we know anything about who's acquiring the businesses?" Harry asked.

"That's where it gets interesting. We have the one individual you picked up on under surveillance day and night. It's seems like he never leaves the Alley. So either he's operating alone or he has some

means of communicating or traveling that we aren't aware of...yet," Milligan replied. "But there is something odd. You know that smash and grab thief you bagged?"

"Yes."

"Took a while for us to find out what was going on with him. He's not all there if you know what I mean. Has a big scar running along the side of his head under his hair. Looks like some kind of head injury. Not a lot of detail on him but what we have found out is he's out of Eastern Europe, possibly from Durmstrang, maybe fifteen or twenty years ago and for a couple of weeks before the robbery he was seen a few times in Knockturn Alley. We think he might have a connection with our friend buying up the shops. Asking him direct questions doesn't get much of anything worthwhile but if you sit and talk to him about different things, it comes out in bits and pieces. Those two that were lent to us by Magical Catastrophes have proven to be very good at it. We're hoping another week or so will give us more definitive information. It's too bad we can't just pry the top of his head off and root around to find out what he knows," the last said with a sardonic grin.

"No, we aren't about to try something like that, physically or magically," Harry said. "But it does give me a thought. Where are you holding him?"

"He's downstairs in the holding area. We have him sitting in the cell keepers' lounge. It seems to keep him relaxed and there's an investigator with him at all times and guards watching from outside. Do you want to talk to him?" Milligan asked.

"No, but I would like to see him," Harry replied thoughtfully.

"You're the boss. Now?"

"Yes, better sooner than later," Harry said as he stood up.

He followed Milligan out of his office and they walked down the corridor to the nearest elevator that they took down to the holding area that was adjacent to the courtroom that Harry had become

familiar with some years ago. A heavy door was pulled open and revealed a long narrow corridor that had a number of doors on either side. The first one on the left had a guard sitting outside on a stool. As Harry approached he stood up.

Milligan went to the door and slowly slid the small panel back that otherwise blocked the viewport. He stood back and gestured for Harry to step up. He did and as he looked into the room he saw the thief sitting at a small table, some cards and a few magazines spread out in front of him. Across from him sat an unremarkable looking wizard in drab robes with a small notebook in front of him. The two were having a quiet conversation and at one point the investigator jotted a brief note on the page in front of him. Harry looked around the room to fix a few details in his mind and then he nodded.

“That should do it, Milligan. Thanks,” Harry said.

“Do you mind if I ask what ‘it’ is, sir?”

“I don’t mind if you ask, but I’m not going to tell you just yet. I want to check something first. If it works, you’ll find out fast enough. If it doesn’t you won’t have had time to figure out I’m crazy or something.”

Milligan just looked at Harry.

“I’m going to be gone for most of the day. If I have anything for you by the end of it I’ll come find you,” Harry said.

“Yes, sir,” Milligan replied.

Harry nodded and then headed back toward the elevator and took it up to the lobby. From there he Disapparated from the Ministry. He popped into place just to the side of the entrance to the Memorial Park outside of Hogsmeade. He paused to look through the arched gateway and down the road where the first few gravesites were visible. With a sigh he turned and began the walk up to the entrance of the school. As it was a school day he wasn’t surprised not to see anyone outside the building and Harry proceeded alone up to the main entrance and used the heavy knocker. He waited for a few

moments and then heard the latch being thrown aside and the heavy door being pulled open.

“Who is it banging on the door?” called the gravelly, disgruntled voice of Filch.

“It’s Harry Potter, here to see the Headmistress, please,” Harry replied, keeping his voice even and polite.

“Wha’? Potter you say, so, come back to stir up some trouble, Potter?”

“Not at all, Mr. Filch. I would just like to speak to the Head if I may?”

The aging, gnarled little man looked Harry up and down and then waved him in through the door.

“You know the way to the Head’s office, better then most,” was all Filch said as he walked away and left Harry alone.

Harry could only shake his head and smile. No matter how much things change, some things and some people remain constant. He began the climb up the staircase that led to Professor McGonagall’s office. A number of greetings were called out from various portraits he passed along the way. He was just at the top of the stairs when the voice of Sir Cadogan, the hyper aggressive knight, called to him.

“Abate thy pace, Sir Harry. The Headmistress sends word that she is on her way and wishes to meet you here.”

“Thank, Sir Cadogan. I’ll be happy to,” Harry said as he looked at the small, normally belligerent, metal clad wizard who was looking out from the incongruous scene of witches and wizards strolling along a wooded lane.

“It’s very good to see you again, Sir Cadogan. I hope you are keeping well.”

“Aye, well enough in these times, good sir. Things are a bit placid since you laid that scoundrel low but occasionally an ill mannered

student needs to be pulled up short and taught a thing or two about chivalrous behavior.”

“Harry. Harry Potter,” called the familiar voice of the Headmistress. “It’s so good to see you, but I thought you weren’t due here until next Tuesday.”

“That’s right, Professor. I’m not here for a lecture. This is business,” he said quietly.

“Hmm, this sounds serious. Come walk with me and we’ll find someplace quiet to talk. My thanks to you, Sir Cadogan, for delivering my message.”

“It was an honor to assist you, Headmistress,” the little knight said as he bowed, clanking as he did.

“Oh, and I understand congratulations are in order. Word of your engagement to Ms. Weasley spread through the castle like wildfire on Saturday. Bill Weasley confirmed it this morning,” the Headmistress said with a small smile.

“Thank you, Professor. In fact, the source of that information is why I’m here. I’d like to speak to Abigail Westwood if I can.”

“Is there something amiss with her, Harry?” Professor McGonagall said with genuine concern.

“Not with her but there is a problem that her particular talent might prove useful with,” Harry said.

“Hmmm, well I don’t know where she is at this moment, Harry, but it’s only half an hour until lunch. Why don’t we head down to the Great Hall and wait for her there. Perhaps you can explain what the problem is. We’ve been working with Abigail quite a bit to try and determine the extent of her talent,” Professor McGonagall said.

“Sounds like a good idea, Professor. I hope that includes an invitation for lunch. It’s been a while since breakfast,” Harry said with a smile.

The Headmistress just laughed as they continued down to the Hall. As they entered the Hall there was a scattering of students making use of the long tables for study or game playing during a free period. Harry's entrance created a stir and while the presence of the Headmistress forced a certain restraint there were still many called out welcomes and offered hands from those that Harry passed walking down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables. Harry smiled and waved and shook a few hands. The Head led him up to the faculty table and they sat down.

"Now, Harry, can you tell me what's going on that Miss Westwood might be able to help you with?"

Harry began to explain what was going on in Knockturn Alley and what the best guesses were. He also emphasized that some unknown persons had been sighted in Hogsmeade.

He then laid out what he had in mind as far as Abigail was concerned. Professor McGonagall nodded her head.

"I think you've got the right of it by tying yourself into what you're trying to do. As best as Professor Dumbledore and I have been able to work out, her strongest, clearest visions involve you, Harry. We don't know what the link is, but it's there. She's able to see all manner of things if she thinks about them but it's almost like an open corridor exists between you two."

"Hmmm, I'm not so sure that's a good thing, but I'll worry about that later. Right now, I just want to try and get to the bottom of this thing before it gets too far," Harry said.

They chatted for a bit more until the elevated level of noise in the corridors leading to the Great Hall alerted Harry and the Professor to the approach of the student body. Harry couldn't help but smile at the image of his younger self hurtling along those same halls with Ron, Hermione and the rest of the Gryffindors of his year. The students who were already in the Hall cleared away their books and games as the rest poured into the Hall and made their way to the tables. Harry kept an eye out for a particular student and soon saw a familiar head of dark hair bobbing in and out of sight, often disappearing as a taller

student got in the way. Abigail had not gained much in height in the two years since Harry had first met her. It was quite likely that she would remain physically small while possessing a very large talent. Harry was still looking in her direction when some students moved away to take their seats and she looked up toward the faculty table. When their eyes met Harry smiled and Abigail's eyes went wide, her face lighting up in a huge smile. Professor McGonagall waved Abigail to come up to the head table. The tiny child witch rushed toward the dais as Harry stood up and met her at the top of the short stair case.

"Mr. Potter, you're here early. Professor Weasley told us that you'd be coming next Tuesday," Abigail said in her quiet voice.

"He was right, Miss Westwood," Harry said with a smile. "I will be here next week but something happened that made a trip today necessary. Didn't you see me coming?" Harry said with a smile.

"No, I didn't. We've been very busy this morning and with what happened this weekend I guess I sort of tuned you out," she said with a shy smile.

"I need to talk to you about something, Abigail. Can we chat after you finish lunch?"

"Sure, Mr. Potter, I have a free period after lunch."

"Thank you, Abigail. I'll be here when you're done," Harry said.

She flashed Harry a brief smile and dashed back to her place with the Ravenclaw third years. Harry turned back and took an empty seat that Professor McGonagall indicated. He exchanged handshakes and greetings with other faculty members including Hagrid.

"Alright there, Harry?"

"Yes, Hagrid. Everything is going great. How are you?" Harry replied.

"Just great, Harry. Congratulations to you and Ginny, that's just wonderful," Hagrid said with a big smile. "Oh yeah, I heard from one of

the Centaurs late last week. They're still talkin' about what they want ta do. Summat about the stars and such," he said.

"Thanks, Hagrid. And yeah, Hermione and I thought as much. We'll be patient," he said.

Hagrid smiled under his bushy beard and stumped off to his chair. As the food appeared and everyone began serving themselves and eating Harry let his eyes sweep over the Great Hall. Many of the students looked familiar to him thanks to his work with Bill Weasley and a few of the students noticed him looking and gave tentative waves. Harry would nod and smile when this happened. He gazed up at the ceiling and saw a reflection of the sunny day outside, with a few fluffy clouds drifting across. This room was a central fixture in Harry's life having eaten thousands of meals here and many hours with his friends studying or more likely playing games of wizard's chess with Ron. It held other memories as well, such as the bitter days following the fall of Voldemort. He looked down at the long Gryffindor table, towards the far end where the Weasleys had sat consoling each other after the death of Fred. Then his thoughts shifted to his last year as a student when he and Ginny sat side by side everyday for that whole year and he couldn't help but smile. Ginny, his Ginny, the future Mrs. Harry Potter, always brought a smile to his face. A thought began to take shape in his mind. It was an interesting thought and one that he felt was right in many ways.

He continued along this line of consideration as he idly ate the food on his plate. He was snapped back to the here and now when he heard Professor McGonagall calling his name.

"Harry. Harry."

"What? Oh, sorry, Professor. Guess I was daydreaming a bit," Harry said a little sheepishly.

"Yes, I can just imagine. But Miss Westwood is ready for you. We can make use of the closest classroom to start with. Come along."

Harry got up and followed the Headmistress and met Abigail at that bottom of the stairs off the dais. She gave him a little smile and

walked along beside him, the top of her head not even reaching to his shoulder. They made their way down the main corridor to a general use classroom. Professor McGonagall ushered them in and closed the door.

“Miss Westwood, Mr. Potter told me he needs your help with something related to his job as Auror Chief. It’s something that you and I and Professor Dumbledore have been working on and I’d like you to try and do what you can, alright?”

“Yes, ma’am,” came the quiet, almost breathless reply. Abigail shifted in her chair and looked at Harry expectantly.

“Abigail, we are having an issue with some people causing some problems in Knockturn Alley. My investigators have been able to find a few things out but a lot remains unknown. We have one man in custody but he doesn’t think very well. We think he hurt his head sometime in the past. I was hoping you might be able to tell me something about him. I saw him this morning. Can you see that?” Harry asked, his voice very soft and quiet, his eyes never leaving Abigail’s face.

The diminutive girl looked at Harry, her big dark eyes loosing some of their focus, then her lids falling to cover about half her eyes.

“He’s a big man. You are watching him sitting at a table and someone else is sitting with him. They are talking but the conversation doesn’t make much sense. The big man just kind of rambles but now and again the other man asks a question or writes down a note,” Abigail was saying in a dreamy voice. “You first saw the big man when he came out of the jewelry store with a handful of gold chains. It’s the same jewelry store where you proposed to Ginny and bought her that beautiful green ring. It’s the same color as your eyes.”

Harry coughed and blushed a bit as Professor McGonagall smiled at him.

“The big man had come out of Knockturn Alley. He wasn’t supposed to but he did anyway. Another man had yelled at him. You’ve seen this other man, Mr. Potter. I saw you watching him a while ago. He

never seems to leave the Alley. He just goes in and out of all the shops. He makes the shop owners nervous, some are afraid of him. I think he might be related to the big man, they look kind of alike. I'm not sure but I think the one you were watching was the one who caused the other one to hurt his head. I think there's something in one of the stores, they sell potions and strange things in there," Abigail said, her voice drifting as if she was concentrating. "He goes down into the basement and doesn't come back for a long time, hours maybe. Sometimes he looks like his gotten wet or dirty. I'm pretty sure they aren't from around here, not London, not even England. They talk funny. I can't really see anything else. Maybe if I saw them in person."

"No, Abigail, I don't think I want you to do that. You've been a big help as it is," Harry replied quietly.

Abigail opened her eyes fully and they focused on Harry. She gave him a shy smile.

"You're afraid something might happen to me, aren't you?"

"Yes, Abigail. I would be afraid that something might happen. You've given me a very big clue that I think will be very helpful. Thank you. Do you feel ok?"

"Just a little tired. If I strain too hard I get dizzy, but I don't really have to strain to see you," she said.

"Harry, we've found that Abigail needs to rest a while after one of these sessions. Would you mind sitting with her? I need to dismiss the students from the Great Hall and then I'll bring back some pumpkin juice for her," the Headmistress said.

"Certainly, Professor McGonagall, I'd be glad to. We've got some catching up to do."

The Headmistress left and Harry sat back in his chair looking at Abigail. She sat with her hands folded in her lap looking back at him with her head tilted to one side a bit. Even though she was thirteen she didn't look much changed from the first day they had met.

"How are you getting along here, Abigail? Your classes are going well?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes, sir. I'm doing quite well. Some of the professors say that I remind them of Ms. Granger in certain ways."

"I've said that myself on occasion," Harry said as he nodded.

"The only thing I'm not doing well with is flying. Madame Hooch has tried but I'm just too small to get the broom to do what I want," the little girl said with disappointment plain in her voice.

"You really want to be able to fly don't you, Abigail?"

"Yes, sir. More than anything. I just hope someday I grow up enough to ride one well."

Hoping to change the direction of the conversation Harry said,

"I got a chance to see your artwork in the ice cream shop the other day, Abigail. You did a wonderful job."

"Oh, thanks, sir. That was a lot of fun. And Ms. Johnson let me have all kinds of treats for free. I used the money she paid me to buy a couple of extra wizarding books."

"That's terrific, Abigail. Do you think you'd like to be an artist when you graduate from Hogwarts?"

"I don't know, sir. There are so many things about magic that I find so interesting. I'm not sure what I will wind up doing. But I know that I'll always be interested in drawing and painting. Even if it's just as a hobby."

At this point Professor McGonagall returned with a large glass full of pumpkin juice and handed it to Abigail. She emptied the glass in three long gulps. When she finished she hiccupped once and giggled, then said in her small voice,

“Wow, I didn’t realize how thirsty I was. Do you need me for anything else, Mr. Potter? I’m supposed to meet someone in the library to help them with their potions homework.”

“I think we are done for now, Abigail. Thank you for all your help. I’ll see you next week when I come back,” Harry said, standing up.

The diminutive Ravenclaw stood up and without hesitation stepped up to Harry and gave him a tight hug which he gladly returned.

“Good bye, sir. See you next week. Professor McGonagall?” she asked in way of asking permission to leave.

“On your way, Miss Westwood. We’ll talk more later in the week.”

“Yes, ma’am,” and she dashed out of the room.

Harry and Professor McGonagall watched as she disappeared through the door. The Headmistress looked at Harry,

“So, Mr. Potter. Did that help you in any way?”

“Yes, ma’am. In several ways. I now know that there’s a connection between my thief and what’s going on in Knockturn Alley and that I have a clue to how that acquisitive foreign wizard is getting around. Plus it was good to have a chance to see Abigail,” he said with a small grin.

“And she was pleased to see you again, Harry. I make sure to take time to talk with her once every other week and she chats with Dumbledore now and again. We are no closer to understanding the source or depth of her talent but at least she knows that we care and she can come to us if she feels troubled or sees something that upsets her. Her school work is right at the top of her class and she seems happy here so for now that’s enough,” the Headmistress said with a smile. “And she and we have you to thank for that, Harry. I’ve said this before but your affinity for the students and your teaching talents make you a natural.”

“Yes, Professor and don’t worry, it’s not going to waste. Once we bring in the new recruits I’m sure I’ll be doing lots of teaching and I’ll still be coming up here. As for the rest, all in good time,” Harry said. “Speaking of recruits, I wonder if I might ask a favor of you, Professor.”

“I’m afraid I’m a bit along in years to be thinking of changing careers, Potter,” she said with a slight grin.

“No, ma’am,” Harry chuckled. “I was wondering if I could get your permission to hold the tryouts here. The testers that conduct the OWL and NEWTs will be conducting the tests but I can’t think of a place to hold them. Hogwarts would have the space and be out of the way of muggles.”

“I think we might be able to arrange something. When did you have in mind, Harry?”

“Mid November,” Harry replied.

“Hmm, I’ll have a word with Hagrid and see what would work best. Perhaps I should have a word with the Director for testing and see what would be required. We here have an interest in making this work too, Harry. Perhaps more than most.”

“Yes, ma’am. Well, I think I’ve imposed on you enough for one day. I should be getting back to the Ministry.”

“Harry, I hope I never live to see the day that anyone here sees you as an imposition. I’ll walk you to the front door.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said as they left the classroom and made their way to the door.

As they passed the entry to the Great Hall Harry looked at the Professor and said,

“Professor, do you know if the Great Hall has ever been used for a wedding before?”

"I'm not aware of any instance where it has but then again the school is far older than I am and I don't know all its history," she said, looking at Harry with a twinkle in her eye. "What did you have in mind, Mr. Potter?"

"There are two places in the world I consider home, Professor. The Burrow and Hogwarts. Bill and Fleur were married at the Burrow. George and Angelina will be as well. I thought I would like to do something special for Ginny."

"I'll look into it and if it's up to me I'll say yes. But I should check with the Board of Governors just to be sure. I leave Ginny and Mrs. Weasley up to you," she said with a wink.

"Thank you, Professor."

"It's the least we could do for you, Harry. I'll send you a message when I get word from the Board."

"Thanks again, Professor McGonagall. I'll see you next week," Harry said as he left through the main doors.

He made his way quickly down through the gates and when he was sure he was clear of the protective spells, he Apparated back to the lobby of the Ministry. He hurried down to the Aurors area and went looking for Milligan. He found him in the break room where most of the Aurors without offices congregated when not out on assignments.

"Milligan, I think we got a break on what our friend in Knockturn Alley is using to move around. I think it's somewhere in the basement of the first shop they took over. The one that sells those potions. We need to get in there and find out where it goes," Harry said.

"Um, begging your pardon, sir. But how reliable is this information?"

"This source hasn't been wrong once that I know of. Come down to my office and we'll figure out how to do this," Harry replied.

"Yes, sir."

In a few moments they were seated in Harry's office.

"Based on what I was able to find out, the snatch and grab thief down in holding is related to our friend in Knockturn Alley. What the connection is, I don't know yet. What I do know is his back trail starts in that basement and we have to get in. So what I'm thinking is this. Two go into the shop, one invisible. Two stay outside to watch and serve as back up. The visible one inside distracts the shopkeeper looking for a potion. The one who's invisible heads down into the basement and finds out what's being used to move around."

"Sounds like a way to do it, sir. I'll take three men with me and get right on it," Milligan replied.

"Actually, I'll take you and two others and we'll get right on it," Harry said with a small grin.

"Um, sir. I don't think it's a good idea for you to be going out on assignment..." Milligan's voice drifted off as Harry's green eyes bored into him.

"I don't think I need to remind you, Milligan, I've been on a few missions in the past that could be considered moderately dangerous. I think I can handle this one," Harry said with a crooked grin.

"That's not what I meant, sir. It's not that you can't handle it, but what if something happens to you?" Milligan said.

"Just go pick your two back up men and meet me in the lobby," Harry said.

"Yes, sir," Milligan said reluctantly.

When Milligan left his office Harry could only shake his head. Not too long ago they were ready to send him off by himself, now he was too valuable to send in harms way. How times change. He was going to have to stop at the Black house to get his Invisibility Cloak. He left his robe on the door and headed towards the lobby. He was there ahead of the others and stood waiting near where the old statue of the witch, wizard and the three other magical races stood. It had not been

replaced. A few minutes later Milligan and two other wizards strode into the lobby. The came up to where Harry was standing.

“This is Milbank and Twitchell. They’ve been doing surveillance in the Alley since we started this investigation. They’ll know what to keep a look out for. So, how do you want to do this?”

“I have to stop at my house and get my Invisibility Cloak. I’ll take it with me into Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. I’m known to spend time there. I’ll put on the Cloak and then come out and head for the Alley. Milbank and Twitchell should already be on station in the Alley. I’ll follow Milligan into the Alley and then into the potion shop. While he’s got the shopkeepers attention I’ll sneak around the counter and make my way down the stairs and find out what’s down there. Milligan will try and keep his attention for as long as he can without showing his hand. If he has to leave, have Milbank or Twitchell switch and see how long you can keep him occupied but under no circumstances do you make him suspicious. I can take care of myself if I have to.”

“Yes, sir,” Milligan said but it was obvious he wasn’t happy about it.

Harry was the first to Disapparate and he popped onto the front stairway of the Black house. He made it to three before the door swung open. Kreacher was standing there with Harry’s Invisibility Cloak on his arm.

“How did you know, Kreacher?” Harry asked amazed.

“Kreacher has ways to know what Master Harry needs when he needs them,” the house elf said with a look of satisfaction.

“Thanks, Kreacher. I’ll see you tonight,” Harry said as he took the Cloak and then Disapparated.

He Apparated in the secluded spot near Gringotts that he liked to use and made his way to Weasleys Wizard Wheezes. The sales clerk that had crossed paths with Harry before saw him enter and immediately ducked into the back of the store to alert George of his arrival.

The tall lanky red head emerged a moment later.

“Harry, how are you doing? Recovered from Saturday yet?” he said with a laugh.

“I’m doing fine, George. Can I see you in private?” Harry asked quietly.

George picked up on Harry’s tone and nodded, leading him back to his office.

“What’s going on, Harry?” he asked.

“I just need to cover something I’m about to do. I’m going to use my Invisibility Cloak and I’d appreciate it if you’d take a break and head outside. I’m going to follow you out of the door. I’ll fill you in on the details after it’s over.”

“Sure, Harry. Anything to help. Come on.”

Harry nodded and pulled the cloak over himself. George watched him disappear then nodded again and left the office, feeling more than hearing Harry behind him. As he came out to the sales area he said to both clerks,

“I’m taking a few minutes and going over to see Angelina. Harry is borrowing my office for a bit and doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Yes, Mr. Weasley,” both clerks chimed.

George went outside holding the door just long enough to make sure Harry passed through. With the instincts of a natural born conspirator he casually made his way over to the Ice Cream Haven. Harry made his way across the street where he saw Milligan standing idly looking through a store window. Harry stepped up next to him and quietly said,

“Ok, Milligan. Let’s move.”

Without any outward sign that he knew Harry was there, he lingered a moment and then walked toward the entrance to Knockturn Alley and

turned in and walked down the dark narrow stairway that led to the tarnished underbelly of England's wizarding world. In just a few moments they were approaching the shop that was their target. Several disreputable figures were moving along the narrow, dimly lit alley and Harry could see no sign of Milbank and Twitchell but he was sure they were out there somewhere keeping an eye on the shop. Milligan, who was wearing some very worn robes and had used some simple disguise tricks to alter his appearance, opened the door to the shop and again let it hang open just long enough to let Harry pass through unnoticed.

Harry could see through the robe that the new proprietor was standing behind the counter with his back turned. As Milligan approached the counter the man turned and Harry could see it was the same wizard that they had been watching for the past few weeks.

"Vot can I doo for yooo," the wizard asked in an oddly accented voice.

"I needs something special like to deal with a problem I gots," Milligan said, his voice pitched low and gravely.

"Vot kind of problem?"

Artfully Milligan moved the suspect further down the counter, talking quietly as if he didn't want to be overheard by anyone coming in the door. Harry took the opportunity to very slowly and quietly make his way around the near end of the counter and based on what he recalled of Abigail's vision he was able to spot the opening in the floor that marked the top of the staircase that led down into the basement. As stealthily as he could he made his way down the stairs into a dimly lit passageway that led back under the store. The passageway opened onto a large cellar that contained a number of crates and barrels and a large opening in the far wall, framed by dark wood that had been carved with a number of symbols and sigils. Harry was sure that this was the device or portal that was being used to leave Knockturn Alley to wherever it is the wizard upstairs and his co-conspirators were headquartered. Harry took a moment to examine some of the items sitting on top of the nearer crates. While not entirely familiar they had the look of contraband items.

Taking a deep breath and drawing his wand Harry walked up to the wooden frame and sensing nothing outwardly dangerous he stepped into the darkness. His effort was rewarded with a brief tingling sensation and a feeling of mild dislocation, almost like a stationary portkey. Another step brought him back into dim light and what he saw was alarming. He was in a much larger room, more like a warehouse that was crammed with all manner of objects. As his eyes became accustomed to the low light level the objects began to resolve themselves into wooden boxes, bound bales and barrels. There were sounds of voices coming from the right and Harry began a slow walk towards them. As he approached the end of a passage that separated tall stacks of boxes he saw a space open before him that was much more brightly lit. There was a table in the middle and around it sat half a dozen men in drab robes and battered hats. They were chatting idly in a foreign language that reminded him of the Bulgarians that had come to the Quidditch World Cup just before his fourth year, but he didn't think it was the same.

He did his best to look around from his vantage point. To his left he could see a double door that looked like it opened to the outside, wherever that was. He turned around and walked back the way he came, passing the portal and continuing on until he came to the wall. A smaller passage way ran along the length of the wall. He saw several windows and he approached one and looked outside. The sun was beginning to set but there was enough light that Harry could make out that the building seemed to sit alone at the end of a dirt road. The ground was rough and it began to rise into low hills about fifty yards away. He would have preferred to look around more but he was concerned about how much time had passed since he entered the potion shop basement. He carefully made his way back to the portal and taking one more look around he slipped through and emerged back into the cellar under Knockturn Alley. It was still vacant and he quickly but quietly made his way to the bottom of the staircase. He could hear a muted conversation but couldn't figure out who was up there. He slowly ascended the staircase and as he neared the top he could tell the 'customer's' voice wasn't the one Milligan had assumed. He emerged from the floor opening and was only six feet or so from the man behind the counter and he held his breath as he

slowly edged his way from behind the counter and closer to the door that led out of the shop.

He remained there for perhaps five minutes as whichever one of Milligan's men concluded their business. He couldn't tell which one it was. The man slid a small vial into his pocket and made to leave the shop. He opened the door and then turned to look back at the shop owner as if to ask another question but then just shook his head and turned back to the door. Harry took this opportunity to slip through and out into the Alley. He heard the door close behind him but he was moving toward the staircase where Milligan, still in disguise loitered. As he passed Harry whispered,

"I'm clear."

He proceeded back to the WWW shop and waited a few moments until a customer opened the shop door and Harry quickly followed in behind him. In moments he was back to George's office which was still empty. He pulled off the cloak and folded it up and slipped it into his coat pocket. He left the office and as he emerged he nodded to the clerks and said,

"Tell George that I had to leave but thanks for the use of his office. I'll see him later."

He was out onto the street and looking about when he noticed Milligan had made his way up towards Quality Quidditch Supply. Catching his eye Harry nodded once and then casually made his way back to his secluded spot and Disapparated back to the Ministry lobby. Within a quarter hour he was in his office talking with Milligan, still in the disreputable robes but his face back to normal.

"This is what we have. In the basement, which contains a lot of crates and boxes, by the way, is a portal of some kind. You step through it and it feels like a weak portkey but it takes you to a similar portal in a large warehouse out in the middle of nowhere. The place is full of more boxes and barrels and stuff. Plus six wizards, at least that I could see, all speaking what sounded like an east European language. The stuff in the basement of the potion shop looks to be a lot of contraband items but I didn't have a chance to look too closely. I

assume the stuff in the warehouse is more of the same, and there is a lot of it. Were you able to find out anything?" Harry asked

"Not a lot. I do know our friend is very cagey and knows a lot about the dark side of potions for one thing. I told him I needed something that would take care of a problem for me. Told him I wanted to influence my mother-in-law into giving me her money. Kind of a poor idea but I figured if I got too clever he might catch on. He was reluctant to agree since it would be an illegal potion and he didn't know me. I dropped the names of some shady characters from the Alley that I use on occasion and he finally agreed to discuss it with me. He said he'd give me what I needed once he confirmed my contacts.

"It took a while but I finally had to leave. Twitchell went in next and he just bought some stuff to ward off garden gnomes. It's not exactly illegal but some of the ingredients are in the gray area. Wouldn't stick as evidence if we charge him for dealing in illegal potions but at least it bought you the time you needed."

"Yeah, you guys did great. Now, I just need to figure out where the warehouse is so we can check it more thoroughly before we raid the place. I think I know where I might get the information. Good job to you and your men. Go home and get some rest," Harry said.

"Thanks, sir. See you in the morning."

Harry sat back in his chair and considered what he saw. The portal wasn't anything like he had seen before. It might have been rash of him to have gone through but what else could he have done. He certainly wasn't going to ask someone else to do it instead. He was also surprised to see the sheer amount of material that it looked like this gang was prepared to try and spread around England, unless this was just a staging area and they had larger ambitions. He looked up at the clock and saw that it was after six. It had been a long day and he was tired. He grabbed his robe and left his office and in a few moments he was at the front door of the Black house and in the space of a few heartbeats he was ushered in by Kreacher.

"Hullo, Kreacher. Can you whip up something quick for dinner? It's been a long day and I'd like to eat and maybe go to sleep early."

"Certainly, Master Harry. Kreacher will bring it to your study. There is an owl message from Mistress Ginny there on your desk," the house elf replied.

"Thanks, Kreacher. That will be great."

Harry's fatigue slipped away momentarily as he hurried to his study to read Ginny's message. It lay in the center of his desk, neatly folded and the wax seal intact. He broke the seal and unfolded the message.

Dearest Harry,

I'm writing this before practice starts for our tournament appearance in France. I couldn't wait to tell you how unforgettable this weekend had been. I know that we had our agreement regarding our future together but to sit here looking at the beautiful ring that is a symbol of our love is like a dream come true. Then to seal the bond as we did on that magical night made it a time that will live in my memory forever. I am finding our time apart more painful after each parting. I've have been considering this and have some ideas that I wish to discuss with you. We leave for France Monday next and I had hoped we could find some time together before I go. What do you think? Please reply as soon as you can. I love you more each time I see that little bit of your eyes resting on my left hand. I look forward to your reply, my love.

With all my heart,

Your Ginny.

Harry sat back with the parchment still held in his hands. He let the events of the last weekend replay in his mind and he could not help but agree it would be two days that would live in his memory forever. He also agreed that their separation was akin to physical pain and it got worse each time they had to part. He wondered what she had in mind. He opened his eyes and looked at the message again. He

pulled a sheet of parchment from his desk drawer and with quill and ink composed his reply.

Darling Ginny,

Your message was an unexpected and most welcome surprise. I have to agree that the two days just past will be a part of me forever. While some would say my life has been a troubled one, it has in fact been filled with much good fortune, but none more so than the one that brought you into it. I have some ideas that I would like to discuss with you as well and I think it should be easy for me to come to Holyhead on Saturday morning. If this works well for you just jot a note on this message and send it straight back with my owl. He will wait. I miss you, too, more than I ever thought it would be possible. I hope to see you on Saturday.

Forever yours,

Harry.

He reread the message then folded and sealed it with wax. He walked up to his room where his owl sat wide eyed on its perch. Harry attached the message to its leg and said,

“Take this to Ginny please and wait for an answer.”

The owl gave a soft hoot and waited until Harry opened the window. It then spread its wings and flew out into the cool night air. Harry closed the window and went back down to the study. Kreacher had set Harry's dinner tray on the desk and he proceeded to devour it. Apparently all the magical travel he had done during the day had used up a lot of energy. Once he was finished he retired to his comfortable chair with several of the books of magic that he had acquired. He wanted to see if there was anything in there about magical portals. It was about three hours later when he finally closed the last book and having found nothing but a few vague references made his way back up to his room and turned in for the night.

When he awoke the next morning he found his owl back on its perch and a small message roll laying on his nightstand. Kreacher must

have let the bird back in and taken the message from him. He saw the owl asleep on its perch. He reached over and took the message and unrolled it. It looked like Ginny tore off the bottom of his message and used it for her answer.

Sweetheart,

Saturday would be wonderful, Friday night would be even better. I'm anxious to see you.

Ginny

PS I kept your message so I could reread it each night before I go to sleep.

G.

Harry couldn't help but smile. He thought Friday night would be better, too. He got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom to shower and get ready for the day. Kreacher had his breakfast ready. Harry noticed that Kreacher had been taking great pains to dress himself and he had to admit the effect was very noticeable. A thought occurred to him.

"Kreacher, I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes, please."

"Certainly, Master Harry."

"Do you recall my friend, Hermione Granger?" Harry asked.

"Of course, Master Harry. Hermione Granger was the one that first insisted that Kreacher be treated with kindness. Kreacher will always remember."

"Well, she's been given an assignment at the Ministry to contact the non human magical races to try and begin, well, a discussion on how we could all get along better. Is there anyone or a group that exists that could speak for the house elves?" Harry asked.

“Such a thing is not something that Kreacher is aware of, Master Harry. House elves live with those they work for. Perhaps the house elves of Hogwarts have heard of such a thing,” Kreacher replied.

“Maybe, ok, thanks Kreacher.”

“Master Harry is most welcome. One hopes that Hermione Granger can do for others what she has helped do for Kreacher, with Master Harry’s help of course.”

Harry just smiled and then left for the Ministry. When he arrived he had an odd message on his desk. He was asked to visit the corridor near the chambers of the Wizengamot where the portraits of prior Chief Warlocks were hung. A small smile crossed his face as he stood up and made his way down to the lower levels. As he approached the portraits he heard a familiar voice call to him.

“Good morning, Harry,” came the soft voice of Professor Dumbledore.

“Good morning, Professor.”

“Harry, I’ve been asked to relay a message to you from Professor McGonagall. Miss Westwood apparently saw you during your travels yesterday afternoon. She says that she saw where the old building was and she is sending you a map by owl this morning. She said she hopes that it helps.”

“That’s great, Professor. I was hoping this might happen but I wasn’t expecting anything so quickly. I hope you don’t mind being the messenger, sir,” Harry replied.

“Have no fear, Harry. I’m only too glad to be of assistance and I’m also glad of any opportunity to speak to you. Please know I will always stand ready to be of service. I owe you far more,” Dumbledore replied.

Harry was inwardly very pleased and somewhat humbled at the idea that the greatest wizard of his age was so ready to help him. And perhaps he could be of even more help.

"Professor, I do need your help."

"Ask away, my boy."

"Sir, the way I went on my travels yesterday afternoon was something I've never heard of. It was a doorway or portal in the basement wall of a shop in Knockturn alley. I went through on that side and after a brief moment of darkness came out in that old building that Abigail mentioned. It felt almost like it was a weak or stationary portkey. It had a dark wooden frame with markings carved around it. I couldn't find a reference to it in some of the books I got that you recommended but I still have more to look through," Harry explained.

"Hmmm, it's not something that comes immediately to mind, Harry. But there are many hanging on the wall in the Head's office that I can question. Let me see what I can do. Stop by before you go home this evening."

"Yes, sir, and thank you very much," Harry said gratefully.

"Not at all, my boy. Things have been a bit quiet with you gone and so preoccupied. I'm glad for the opportunity. See you this evening."

"Yes, sir."

Harry turned and began to walk back toward the elevators and he was sure he heard the beginnings of a whispered conversation behind him. He smiled. It was good to be working with his mentor again. When he returned to his office he began writing down notes on his thoughts about the case, what might be going on and who might be involved. He sent a message down to Milligan asking him to give him a status on what they had been able to find out from the smash and grab thief they had in custody. Around noon a bushy head of brown hair came into view around the side of the door.

"Hiya, Harry. Any plans for lunch?" Hermione asked him.

"No, Hermione, what did you have in mind?"

"I'm meeting Ron at the Cauldron. He asked that I invite you along," she said with a smile.

"Are you sure you want me along. I don't want to impose on you two," Harry said.

"Nonsense, Harry. We both want to see you and Ron specifically asked. He and I have our share of time together. Come on," she insisted.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied with a smile.

In a matter of minutes they had Apparated into the rear courtyard of the Cauldron from the lobby and were walking through the back entrance. Ron was already there, waving at them from a table along the front wall. Hermione hurried over and Harry followed at a leisurely pace to give them a moment to greet each other alone. By the time he got to the table his two best friends had untangled themselves and Ron was reaching for his best friend's hand.

"Harry, how are you, mate?"

"Good, Ron. Thanks for the invitation," Harry said with a smile.

"Well, I know I saw you Saturday but it was so crazy we didn't get to talk much," Ron said with a big grin.

"Yeah, it was a pretty hectic day."

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to be there, Harry, but I had a family function and since it was all muggles I couldn't explain leaving so..."

"It's ok, Hermione. Family is important," Harry replied.

They sat down at the table and Tom the innkeeper came over.

"Mr. Potter and friends, so good to have you with us. I guess it won't be too long before I can't say that anymore."

"Why's that, Tom?" Harry asked, but suspected the answer.

"I'm going to sell the Cauldron to Neville Longbottom and his fiancée Hannah Abbott, provided they can get the money from Gringotts, but it sounds pretty promising. I'm getting too old and with no one in the family who wants it," he shrugged.

"Well, if it's what you want, then that's great, Tom, but the place won't be the same without you," Harry said.

"As always, you are too kind, Mr. Potter," Tom replied then took their orders.

"Harry, isn't that amazing. Neville and Hannah owning the Cauldron," Hermione said.

"Yes, they were telling me about it last week. Something tells me that Neville is going to wind up replacing Professor Sprout at some point, but Hannah really wants this place."

"Um, Harry," Ron began. "Are you involved in this somehow? One of your silent partner deals?"

"Not that way, Ron. I suggested they contact Gringotts and I told the bank they could use my account as a source for the loan, but at minimal interest and no ownership stake for me. I probably owe it to Neville to just buy the place for them, but I don't think that would work out well."

Ron shook his head a little while Hermione reached over to take Harry's hand. Ron then cleared his throat.

"Harry, how are things going with your plans for the Aurors and all?"

"Well, I've got the go ahead to hold open tryouts for new recruits. Looks like it will be at Hogwarts in mid November, on a Saturday. I was discussing it with Professor McGonagall yesterday when I was up there."

He proceeded to fill them in on his trip to the school and his visit with Abigail Westwood. He left out the part about his ideas for the

wedding. He then told them briefly about the discovery and use of the portal.

“Never heard of anything like that, mate,” Ron told him, his voice conveying the excitement he felt listening to Harry’s adventures.

“A travel portal. It seems to ring a bell, Harry. I’ll take a look at my library at home tonight and see if I can find something. Ron, would you be willing to help me look?” she asked, deep in thought.

“Sure, Hermione. I’ll be over right after we close at Hogsmeade. No night hours today,” Ron said just before taking a sip of water.

“Are you sure you going to get any research done?” Harry asked mildly.

Hermione looked at Harry in outrage then broke into hysterical laughter since at precisely the same moment Ron started to laugh and spit his water across the table and hit Harry square in the face. Harry slowly took his napkin and began to wipe the water off his face and glasses.

“Jokes on me, I guess,” he said.

“So’s the water, mate,” Ron said in between laughs.

Harry spent an enjoyable time with Ron and Hermione and then headed back to his office. On his desk was a file folder that contained a copy of the manuscript that contained the relevant comments from the mentally challenged would be thief. It appeared that the man and presumably the man in the potion shop were from the city of Minsk in Belarus. He wasn’t always this way but had a bad accident but he couldn’t remember where or when. He had been cooped up in a shop in Knockturn Alley and the day of the robbery attempt he had been left alone too long and he wandered away and wound up in Diagon Alley. He thought the items he could see through the window of the jewelry store were pretty and he wanted to see them up close. He didn’t know why he took the chains, he just thought they were so nice and shiny and he took them. The last notes were from the two agents that had been working to extract these needles from the haystack of

the man's ramblings. In short they indicated that they didn't think that he had any real information on what was going on but they would keep going for a few more days on the chance he may say something that would be of value.

Harry closed the file folder and sat back. The location would certainly track with the accents and foreign language he had heard. He would have to ask Milligan how they understood what the man was saying. Harry couldn't imagine him speaking the Queens English. He tried to keep himself busy while he waited for Abigail's message and map. Around mid afternoon a messenger delivered a fairly large roll of parchment that had been sent by the Testing Director laying out what she and her staff believed were the kinds of skills that Harry was looking for. He carefully reviewed the document and after making some notes on it realized he had no idea how someone summoned a messenger so he got up and carried the scroll back to the Director's office and left it with her secretary. By now it was getting late and he was hungry so he decided he would head for home. Either the owl would find him there or he would get the message in the morning. He doubted the smugglers were going to be changing addresses anytime soon.

He had to detour back down to the corridor near the Wizengamot chambers first to see if Professor Dumbledore had any information for him. Unfortunately Harry found the portrait frame empty. He supposed the Professor was off looking for information. A voice called to him from a little further down the hall. He followed the sound and came to stand in front of the portrait of a rather formidable looking witch. She looked down at Harry with steely gray eyes.

"Young man, Professor Dumbledore asked that you be told he was delayed in his search for the information you requested and that you attend him here at the noon hour tomorrow."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry replied with a slight bow of his head. "I'll return at noon tomorrow."

He was preparing to turn away when her voiced pulled him up short.

"You look familiar. Weren't you down here some years ago for a hearing before the Wizengamot? Something about underage magic wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, ma'am. It was an emergency and my second offense so..." he said but she cut him off.

"What a load of nonsense that was. As if the Wizengamot should be bothered with that sort of thing with all manner of fiends running about. But you surely took care of that. Dumbledore told us the whole story of course. If you ever have questions about wizarding law or legal proceedings you come right here, young man," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. I will and thank you for your help," Harry replied politely.

"Not at all, young man. It's good to see some sense and manners around the place again."

With a nod Harry moved back towards the elevators and home. As always, Kreacher welcomed him and took his robe. Harry went up to his room to see if anything had arrived but nothing as yet. His own owl was standing on its perch watching him with its large eyes. It gave a soft hoot and Harry walked over and opened his window to allow it to get some exercise. No sooner had his own owl cleared the window when another perhaps half its size struggled through and crash landed on Harry's bed. It carried two pieces of parchment on its legs and Harry carefully removed them. He recognized the bird as the one that Abigail had been given to take home after her first year. He gently lifted the exhausted creature and carried it over to the perch so recently vacated. He offered the bird some water, which it gratefully accepted before tucking its head under its wing and promptly dropped off to sleep. Harry unrolled the two pieces of parchment and saw that one was a note and the other a carefully drawn map. He read the note.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I saw what you were doing while wearing your cloak. You looked all blurry, why was that? Anyway, the big building you were in is on an old farm in the northern midlands. I drew a map showing a couple of

nearby towns. On the other side is a closer view showing an old dirt road and some hills on either side. I hope this helps you find the building. It looks different on the outside then it did when you were inside. See you next week.

Your little sister,

Abigail

He looked at the map and as she had indicated there were several towns listed that Harry recognized as being in Derbyshire. That would account for the hills he had seen. He would get this to Milligan at once to put the building under surveillance. He wanted to know what was around them and to give Professor Dumbledore time to try and find out something about the portals he had used. He certainly was indebted to that small, strangely gifted child and he wondered what he could do for her. It could be argued that he had done a great deal already but as usual Harry wasn't thinking in those terms. He got up to leave the room, first checking to make sure there was more water and some feed for the smaller owl when it awoke. Harry then made sure his window was open enough for his own bird to get back in and then went down to his study. Kreacher stood there waiting for him.

"Master Harry would like some dinner now, yes?"

"Yes, Kreacher, I would like that very much, thank you."

Kreacher bowed his way out of the room and Harry sat back in his desk chair and thought for a few minutes about Abigail. He wondered if she would consider a career as a psychic investigator working for the Ministry. Out of nowhere an idea popped into his head about what he could do for her and the more he thought about it the more he liked it. He pulled out a piece of parchment and jotted down a few notes. It might take some doing but he knew in the end it would be worth it.

When Kreacher brought his dinner Harry took the time to savor it and enjoy the expert cookery. In spite of their inauspicious start, Harry conceded he wouldn't know what to do without the little elf. After eating he continued his research into the issue of magic portals and

at one point smiled when he wondered how Ron and Hermione were doing on the very same topic.

The next morning was a particularly nasty one. Somewhere around midnight a storm had rolled in and decided to stay for a while, with pouring rain and blustery wind. Fortunately his owl must have sensed the onset of rain and had returned permitting Harry to secure his window before it got bad. When the big owl saw that his perch was occupied it took a circuit around the room and then settled gently on the vacant end, then slowly eased sideways causing the smaller owl to budge up closer to the other end. It raised its head from under its wing and hooted softly but perhaps realizing it was the guest it slowly shuffled over until there was enough room so that the resident bird could take its usual place near the center. Then they both promptly went to sleep. When Harry arose that morning he grunted. He hated being out in the rain. Years of Quidditch practice and matches in the abysmal weather that would hammer Hogwarts had imbedded a deep dislike for such events. After a good breakfast he donned his heavy waterproof cloak and a squat wider brimmed wizard's hat and set off for Diagon Alley first thing. He stopped at the Quality Quidditch Supply store.

"Mr. Potter," the store owner called out to him. "So very good to see you, sir. How may I be of assistance?"

"Good morning, Mr. Quiddly. I'm in the market for a special broom," Harry replied.

"Something more special then your Firebolt, Mr. Potter?"

"It's not for me. It's for a young lady, around thirteen. She's rather small and just can't get a full sized broom to respond properly. And from what I've seen, brooms of the proper size are usually spelled for very young children so they aren't very usable for someone her age. Do you have anything that's small enough in size but has the full flying features of a standard sized broom?" Harry asked.

"We don't normally carry something like that Mr. Potter but custom sized brooms are not unheard of. Can you give me an idea of the young ladies height?"

Harry smiled and put his hand on his chest where he knew Abigail's head would come to.

"Hmm, small indeed. But not out of the question certainly. What level of performance were you anticipating, sir?"

"Certainly not to Firebolt standards, Mr. Quiddly. What would be appropriate for someone not likely to play Quidditch but likely to want to have some fun?"

"I think something along the lines of the Comet 160 standard would be adequate. When were you looking to take delivery?" Mr. Quiddly asked.

"As soon as you can and here's five galleons as a deposit."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. I'll get right on it. I would hope to have it in say ten days?"

"That would be great, thanks."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Potter."

Harry left the store happy with the results. He then Disapparated from the nearly vacant street and was at his desk in less than ten minutes. He went looking for Milligan who had been looking for Harry and they both found each other coming around the same corner in opposite directions.

"Ah, Milligan, I was looking for you," Harry said.

"I was looking for you as well, sir."

"Good, I have something very important here. Come on, let's go to my office."

"Yes, sir," Milligan replied.

Once back in Harry's office they faced each other across his desk and Harry spread the map out on his desk.

"Where did that come from, sir?"

"The same source as before, Milligan. I'm sorry, I can't reveal the nature of the source as yet, but rest assured it's reliable. This," he said pointing at the building sketched on the parchment, "is the warehouse I was in. It's up in Derbyshire not too far from these towns. Should be easy to spot from the air. Let's get it under observation so we can figure out how to take it down. I also want to keep that character in Knockturn Alley watched around the clock. This thing is making me uneasy," Harry concluded quietly.

"Well, what I have to tell you won't make you feel any better. We found one of the missing shopkeepers. He was face down in the Thames. Muggles fished him out and we had to make a quick snatch of the body and then obliviate the officers that pulled him out. Nothing fancy. Looks like a knife in the back. This just got a little more serious."

"I was afraid it would. Ok, let's get moving. The sooner we get this wrapped up the better."

"Yes, sir. Let me make a quick copy of this map and then we'll get going."

"Thanks, Milligan."

After Milligan left Harry pulled out a sheet of parchment and began drafting out the announcement for the tryouts to place in the Prophet. He spent about half an hour writing and rewriting until it made some sense to him. He wished he had Hermione there to help him. He folded the sheet and slipped it in his pocket. He still needed to hear from Professor McGonagall about the details but he thought he should at least get some ideas down on parchment.

He looked up and saw that the hour was approaching noon so he got up and hurried back down to the corridor outside the Wizengamot

chambers. This time Professor Dumbledore was there and he smiled down at Harry.

“Ah, Harry, right on time. It appears that we have an interesting mystery on our hands my boy. What you described appears to be a very rare, and virtually unheard of, Spatial Distortion Portal. In a way it’s similar to the portal that is used in the execution chamber here in the Ministry. However, this one has a linked twin that allows someone to move from one spot to another in next to no time. We had to go back nearly five hundred years to find someone who knew anything about them. While there is no known deleterious effect of using one, what could be determined is that if a person were to get confused and wander off the direct line to the matching portal, they could get lost inside forever.”

“Thank you, Professor. That’s a lot of help. I got the feeling that the cellar under that potions shop is very old compared to the building above. I wonder what was there before.”

“Hard to say, Harry. While not intimately familiar with Knockturn Alley, it is known that there have been some very unsavory characters and activities there over the centuries.”

“Unsavory is far too mild a word, Dumbledore,” said a voice Harry recognized immediately as the witch he talked to the previous evening. He stepped back so he could see her and be seen by her. “Young man, know that in my time that pest hole was the home to the most loathsome denizens of the magical world. Many is the time I had to sit in judgment on one or more of those evil creatures and more than one was sent to the block for it. You have a care poking around down there.”

“Yes, ma’am, I will certainly be careful.”

Turning his attention back to Dumbledore he said,

“Is there anything else you think I need to know about this portal, sir?” Harry asked.

"I'm sure there is much that you need to know, my boy, but I'm afraid that's all I can say for now. Oh, and by the way, I understand that congratulations are in order. I'm referring of course to your pending nuptials with Ms. Weasley."

"Thank you, sir."

"You are most certainly welcome, Harry. I can't think of a better match and I'm very pleased that your life is proceeding along this path. You both deserve every happiness," Dumbledore said with smile. Several 'here, here's came from along the corridor.

"Good day, Professor, ma'am, everyone. Thanks again for your help. I'll keep you advised as to what we find out," Harry said, then with a final nod to Professor Dumbledore, he turned and started back up the corridor, but not before he heard,

"Your protégé does you great credit, Professor Dumbledore," the witch said.

"He always has, Madame, he always has."

He smiled a little smile and felt a slight shiver up his spine. He hoped he would never give cause for Dumbledore to change his opinion of him. He made his way to the canteen to grab a quick bite to eat then back to his office. He found two messages waiting for him. One was from Professor McGonagall telling Harry that based on her conversation with the Testing Director and consulting with Hagrid that Hogwarts would make the Great Hall available in the morning of the second Saturday in November at nine o'clock for signing in the applicants and any paper work required then out to the Quidditch pitch for the testing, weather permitting. His second message was from Hermione asking that he come to her office so she could tell him what she had found out. Tucking the Headmistresses message in his pocket he made his way up to the Director of Magical Law Enforcements office. He asked the secretary where he could find Hermione and she pointed down the hall. Harry walked along and looked at a couple of doors until he saw one with Hermione's name on it. He knocked and when he heard her voice call him in he opened

the door. While not as small as the one Maxwell had it was still smaller than his.

"Hmm, you'd think the Special Assistant to the Director would rate a bigger office, Hermione," Harry said with a grin.

"Well it's not like I'm in it all that often, Harry, so I don't mind. Sit down; I have some things to tell you. It's not a great deal but it is interesting."

"Great, Hermione. Anything is better than nothing," Harry said.

"Well, what you've come across is something called a Spatial Distortion Portal. Apparently it was invented by a wizard who was on the faculty at Durmstrang about five centuries or so ago. A bit of a mad genius it seems who didn't want to spend a lot of time traveling from his home on the Black Sea coast to the school. After he died it disappeared. One of the gang must have turned it up somehow. That's all I could find out."

"That's terrific, Hermione. I had asked Professor Dumbledore if he knew anything about it and just a little while ago he told me that he found out the same thing about what it's called and around when it was made. He didn't seem to know where it came from but that apparently it doesn't hurt you to use it but you can become lost if you lose your bearings. I'm sure he'll be interested to know about what you discovered. How'd you find out that stuff?"

"Where else, Harry? In a book. You're not the only one collecting rare books on magic. In fact, you're partly responsible for this find," she said with a smug little smile.

"How did I do that?"

"Remember that rare first edition of a History of Hogwarts you got for me for Christmas during our seventh year?"

"Yes."

“Well, in the author’s notes he mentions that a similar history existed for both Durmstrang and Beauxbaton. So, obviously, I had to find copies of both. That’s why I had thought the description you gave was so familiar. It’s described in the Durmstrang history in a section devoted to some of the odder faculty that have taught there and my goodness, have there been some.”

Harry sat there and looked at his best friend for a moment and then smiled,

“Hermione, you’re the best. I think you should pay a visit to Professor Dumbledore and tell him what you’ve found out.”

“It might be some time before I get up to Hogwarts at this rate,” Hermione said.

“He’s right here in the Ministry, Hermione. There is a portrait of him hanging in the corridor outside the chambers for the Wizengamot. He was a Chief Warlock so he’s got one here like he does at Hogwarts.”

“Oh, wow, Harry, that’s great. I’ll get down there this afternoon for sure,” she replied.

They spent a few more minutes chatting and then Harry went back to his office. He had to think ahead a bit and figure out what they were going to do once they had enough information on the warehouse. It would require manpower and a good strategy. He went looking for Maxwell. He found him in his tiny office.

“I need to talk to you, Maxwell,” Harry said from the open doorway.

“Yes, sir,” the older man said.

Harry stepped in and sat down.

“This situation in Knockturn Alley is turning out to be pretty significant to include one shop cellar and a warehouse full of contraband and one dead shop keeper who was just pulled out of the Thames. Milligan and the MIU are doing the surveillance to get what information they can, but we are going to need a solid strategy to take

them down when we move. I want you to get with Milligan and find out what he knows then start to plan the raid. This will be as good a time as any to start building up the Special Tactical Squad. I want your recommendation on who would be the best to head it up, even if it means taking one of your squad. Ok?"

"Yes, sir. I'll get right on it."

"Good," Harry said as he stood up to leave.

"I guess you were right about this after all," Maxwell said quietly.

"It doesn't matter who was right, it just matters that we get these guys before they cause anymore damage," Harry said with a half smile.

Maxwell nodded and Harry turned and left the office. He went back to his office, pulled out the sheet of parchment from his pocket and added the date and location of the tryouts. He tucked it away again and made for the lobby so he could Apparate to Diagon Alley and the office of the Daily Prophet. As he walked from his usual spot toward the building where the Prophet had its offices he noticed a couple of familiar faces from the MIU keeping an eye on the entrance to Knockturn Alley. Harry made no attempt to acknowledge he saw them. When he got to the door for the Prophet he couldn't help but smile at the thought of all the grief they had caused him over the years. It was ironic that they would play a small but significant role in helping with his current efforts. As he pushed the door open a small bell jingled to alert the clerk behind the counter that someone was in the lobby. The clerk looked up and began to say,

"Welcome to the Daily Prophet, sir, how may I..." he said until he recognized who he was talking to.

"help me?" Harry finished for the man. "I want to place a full page ad in the Prophet to run two days a week, every week through the second week of November. I have the copy I'd like to place right here."

Harry took out the folded piece of parchment and slid it across the counter top. The clerk held up the sheet and read through the copy. He placed the copy down on the counter top and looked at Harry.

"If you'd excuse me just a moment, sir," and slipped through a door at the side of the counter.

Harry heard a muttered conversation and then the door swung open and a second, older man moved up to the counter and picked up the piece of parchment. He read through it again and then looked at Harry.

"We'd be glad to run this for you, Mr. Potter. If I may take a moment to suggest a few subtle changes to make it more readable?" he said deferentially.

"Please do. I have no illusions about my writing abilities. I'd appreciate any help you can give me," Harry replied politely.

"If you'd give me just a moment, please," the second man said.

He moved over to a large desk and laid Harry's parchment on one side and pulled out another and began to write on it. In less than five minutes he returned with the new copy and handed it to Harry. He had to admit that it did read better and the larger headline across the top immediately caught his eye. He nodded and said,

"Thanks, it does work better this way. How much to run it as I asked?" Harry said.

The man took a pad from under the counter and did some calculating. When he was done he looked up at Harry and said,

"Let's make it two Galleons for the entire run and I'll include it in the Sunday Prophet the weekend before your tryouts."

"Sounds good, here you go," Harry said as he handed over the two gold coins.

"You don't want us to bill the Ministry?"

"No, I can claim it as an expense. How soon can it run?" Harry asked.

"Tomorrow's edition has already been put to bed, the day after?" the editor suggested.

"Great, thanks."

"You're welcome, Mr. Potter. We're happy to be of assistance."

Harry answered with a small smile then turned and left the shop. He couldn't help but notice the nervousness beneath the businesslike manner. He supposed that some people must be wondering if he was going to use his new position to settle old accounts. He knew he didn't have the time or energy to waste on such things. But if it made people more willing to help him he wasn't about to waste that opportunity either.

He decided to take a slow stroll up and down the Alley just to see what was going on and visit a few of the shops. He stopped into the magical creatures shop and asked the witch behind the counter if she could recommend anything to supplement his owls feed because Harry thought he was working the big bird fairly hard lately.

"Well, Mr. Potter, yours is a big, strong bird but I'm glad you're concerned and I have something that I would recommend."

She walked to shelf and pulled down a box. She returned and placed it onto the counter in front of Harry.

"Put half a teaspoon of this into his feed every day and he'll be right as rain, Mr. Potter. It's good that he's getting so much exercise but he needs the right food to sustain him and keep him strong."

"Thank you, ma'am. He's been a great help to me," Harry said as he placed the coins on the counter and picked up the box.

"Bring him by once in a while, Mr. Potter. I'll be happy to check him over for you."

“I’ll do that and thank you again,” Harry said and with a nod he turned and walked out of the store.

Harry decided not to stop in at the WWW since he tended to make the clerks uneasy but he definitely was going to stop at Angelina’s. He found that there was only one other customer in the shop and as Angelina looked up from serving the young wizard at the counter she exclaimed,

“Harry! It’s wonderful to see you. Give me a moment to finish here,” she said with a smile as she handed the customer his treat and accepted his coin. Then she started to come around the counter and Harry said,

“Hey, hold on there. I’m a customer today. I’ve had a craving for something sweet since mid-morning,” Harry laughed.

“Harry, a customer? You own a quarter of the store.”

“Shhhh. Don’t let out my secret. I’m a paying customer. How about some vanilla with hot fudge sauce?”

“Coming right up,” Angelina said with a smile.

She scooped up the ice cream into bowl and added a generous portion of the dark sauce.

“Sit down, Harry and I’ll bring it out.”

Harry sat down at a table where he could look out the window. Angelina set his treat down in front of him and leaned down to plant a kiss on his cheek. Then she folded her lanky form into the chair across from Harry and smiled.

“How are you, Harry? Has it sunk in yet?”

“You mean being engaged? Kind of, but if I think about it I get sort of a fuzzy feeling. I have to be careful I don’t get distracted but it’s hard, especially being apart so much like we are,” Harry said a bit wistfully.

"I can't imagine how you put up with it, Harry. George and I see each other every day and it's not enough," Angelina said with small smile. "Who would have thought it would turn out like this when we were at school together? George and Fred were fun to be around in those days but they were, well, I don't know. They were such boys. But I guess with setting up the business and then with Fred, well you know, George grew up and while the boy is still there the man really caught my attention and here we are," she said with a bigger smile.

Harry nodded as he listened and spooned up the delicious treat. He swallowed a bite and tilted his head.

"If Ginny is to be believed and I have no reason to doubt her, she seemed to know we were linked almost from the start. I had a much more confused path to follow," he said with a wry grin. "I'm glad she had the patience to wait for me."

"How are the wedding plans coming? I know it's only been a few days but have you talked about it at all?"

"Not yet. I'm going to go to Holyhead this weekend to see her. They leave Monday for France for that tournament. I have a few ideas and I'm sure Ginny has some of her own. We'll see what we can come up with."

"Well, I'm sure Mrs. Weasley has some big ideas. You do realize that Ginny is the first Weasley daughter to be married in something like three generations," Angelina said.

"I know. It should make for some interesting discussions," he said as he finished up the last of the ice cream. "That was really great. I haven't eaten much in the way of sweets since Hogwarts. I didn't realize how much I missed it. I'll have to become a regular."

"You know your welcome anytime, Harry, and it's always on the house."

"Oh, no. I pay like any other customer, Angelina."

"But Harry, you'd only be paying yourself. That doesn't make sense."

“Angelina, how would it look? No one is supposed to know of my share in any of the stores. So if I don’t pay it looks like I’m taking gratuities from a shop owner. We can’t have that. I have to build trust with the magical community and that means a high standard of ethics. We pay like anyone else,” Harry said quietly and seriously.

By now they were standing up and Angelina stepped forward and wrapped Harry in her long arms and then held him at arms length. She had an odd little half smile as she said,

“You’re a rare wizard, Harry, maybe unique. And we’re blessed to have you among us,” she said and then pulled him to her again and he returned the embrace.

As they stood back from one another he gave one of his characteristic smiles and shrugs and said,

“I’m just glad that I’m still around to be among you.”

He took two sickles out of his pocket and pressed it into her hand, leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek and then walked out of the shop. He then stopped in at Flourishes and Blotts and spent some time wandering amongst the shelves and stacks to see if there was anything interesting that he could add to his growing collection. He chatted with the clerk and as the sun began to set he wished him a good night and walked out onto the street. He took a moment to adjust his robes and casually glanced around. He could see that two new MIU operatives were now keeping an eye on the entrance to Knockturn alley. He turned and walked to the wall that separated the Alley from the Cauldron. He Disapparated and arrived at his doorstep just as Kreacher was opening the door.

“Kreacher, can you now sense when I’m on my way to the door?”

“Over time, Master Harry, a house elf becomes attuned to his or her master. Kreacher can tell what Master Harry is doing as long as Master Harry is in the city,” the little elf said as he closed the door behind them. Harry could only smile.

The next two days passed with little of note. Surveillance of the contraband smugglers continued and plans evolved for the eventual raid. On Friday the ad for the tryouts appeared in the Prophet as planned. Hermione stopped by and talked to Harry to see if he heard anything about any of the contacts they were trying to make but neither had heard anything. Hermione sighed and then hoped Harry had a good weekend and left. Harry was having a hard time concentrating as the afternoon wore on. Around four o'clock Maxwell and Milligan stopped by. They gave Harry a briefing on what they had come up with so far but they felt they were at least another week away from taking direct action against the smugglers. There was plenty of evidence that regular deliveries were being made to the warehouse and they wanted to be able to establish a timeline for their coming and going. They were also making inroads into the situation in the Alley itself with the help of informants and MIU agents in disguise. They left his office around five and Harry decided he could wait no longer.

He picked up the small bag that he had Kreacher prepare for him and left for the lobby. He had the image of where he wanted to go firmly in mind. He Disapparated out of the lobby and popped onto the sidewalk outside the Holyhead Quidditch Stadium. He could hear that there was still practice going on and he smiled at his timing. He walked to the outer end of the entrance tunnel and stood listening and catching an occasional glimpse of someone at the other end. He stood quietly waiting for about fifteen minutes and then heard the growing sound of conversation, almost exclusively feminine. He then saw a number of women dressed in practice robes and carrying brooms enter the far end of the tunnel.

A couple of them near the front began pointing to where Harry stood and then calling back over their shoulders. The front line then parted and a slightly built redhead pushed her way forwards. She let out a squeal and began running toward him. Harry took a few steps forward and then set himself, well aware of Ginny's tendency to launch herself at Harry from a dead run. As she neared him she dropped her broom and hurled herself into Harry's arms. Despite his arduous months of physical training he still had to take a step back to absorb the impact. Her embrace was crushing and he could feel her slight frame shudder against him. He held her tightly as well with his cheek

resting atop her head. She let her head slide back a bit to look up at him through misty eyes and said,

“You’re here early.”

“I couldn’t wait any longer. I guess you’re glad to see me,” Harry said with a grin.

Ginny didn’t bother to reply, she just reached up and pulled Harry’s head down and let the lingering kiss she started serve as her reply. Finally they came up for air and Harry could see that while some of the players had already gone into the locker room, most were standing watching the couple with smiles on their faces. Then Harry heard a voice call out from behind.

“Alright girls, get along with you. You’d never think you saw two people kissing before. Move it along.”

The stout form of Ms. Hapnafl, the Harpies manager, came into view as the remaining players made their way into the locker room. Ginny gave a laugh and looked up at Harry.

“I’d better get in there too, sweetheart. It’s been a long day and I need to get a shower and changed. Find a place to wait and I’ll be as quick as I can. Then we can go get some dinner,” she said breathlessly.

“I’ll be right here when you’re done, love.”

Ginny gave him one more kiss and then picked up her broom and dashed back down the tunnel to the locker room door. She turned and blew him a kiss before ducking inside. Harry could hear the sound level inside the room rise appreciably as the door swung closed. He began to look around for a bench or some other spot to sit down.

“Over here, if you please, Mr. Potter. I have a very comfortable chair in my office,” Ms. Hapnafl called out.

Harry smiled and walked toward where the woman was standing near her office door. She quickly walked to the locker room door and opened it. She yelled in,

“Tell Ginny that her Mr. Potter will be in my office.”

Harry opened the office door and then waved Ms. Hapnafl in ahead of him. He was amused to see her blush slightly as she walked past him. The office was perhaps twice the size of Harry’s back at the Ministry and he saw that the walls were mostly covered by Quidditch memorabilia but with enough space given over to a chalk board and a cork bulletin board. He smiled when he saw that the autograph that he had signed over a year before was hanging framed right behind Ms. Hapnafl’s chair. She seated herself and beckoned for Harry to sit across from her in what turned out to be a very comfortable chair.

“We’re honored to have you visit again, Mr. Potter. I know you’ve been to a number of our matches since Ginny joined the team but you’re usually gone by the time I’m able to get away from the team. You seem to be doing well.”

“Yes, I am, thank you, ma’am. I’ve been very busy but things are going well.”

“We all saw your announcement in the Prophet this morning. Ginny was fit to burst when you were made head of the Aurors. What you’re trying to do at the Ministry sure has people talking,” the manager said.

“There’s a lot of change going on, Ms. Hapnafl. It’s needed but it will take some time to get in place. I’m just glad to be a part of it.”

The older woman merely nodded. Harry took the opportunity to turn the conversation away from himself and onto Quidditch. They talked about the upcoming tournament and what the next season would bring. About twenty minutes or so later Ginny knocked on the door. Harry got up and let her in. She looked radiant with the practice grime cleaned away and her hair brushed. Harry couldn’t help but smile.

“Ok, off with you two. Enjoy getting reacquainted but we leave promptly at nine on Monday morning. Don’t be late, Ginny.”

“No, ma’am. I’ll be here on time. C’mon Harry, let’s go.”

The young couple walked arm and arm down the tunnel and out onto the sidewalk. Ginny looked up at Harry and smiled and he smiled back.

“Where should we go for dinner, love? Hopefully somewhere quiet so we can talk.”

“I know just the place, Harry. We need to go to my room at the boarding house and drop off our stuff and then it’s a few blocks away. It’s run by a mixed couple, she’s a witch and he’s a muggle. They make it comfortable for magical folk without revealing anything to the muggles. The foods really great.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

Within half an hour the two were comfortably settled at a secluded table in the restaurant that looked to be several hundred years old. The witch recognized Harry immediately but made only a limited fuss over the two as if they were old friends come to visit. Harry and Ginny had placed their orders and were sitting looking at each other with their hands touching across the table top. Harry finally broke the silence.

“Ginny, have you given much thought to the wedding?” he asked.

“Not in any detail, sweetheart. We’ve been really busy this week and anytime I start to think about it I just sort of start daydreaming about being Mrs. Harry Potter and I don’t seem to be able to get past it. Although I have been giving our honeymoon a few thoughts, especially our wedding night,” she concluded with arched eyebrows.

Harry wet bright red and laughed while Ginny chuckled.

“Well, I have had a thought or two and I was wondering what you thought about the idea of having the wedding in the Great Hall at Hogwarts.”

Ginny sat staring at Harry for a moment and then blinked.

"My gosh, Harry, could we do something like that? Would Professor McGonagall allow something like that?"

"I've asked her and she's agreeable but she's checking with the Board of Governors. I think she'll be able to persuade them. I'm more worried about your mum. She might think that weddings at the Burrow should be a tradition, you know?" Harry said a bit worried.

"Hold that thought. First, what made you think of the Great Hall?"

"I was there on business and I had lunch and while I was sitting up at the head table I looked down at the far end of the Gryffindor table and I was thinking about all the times we sat side by side during seventh year and the idea just popped into my head. I thought you deserved something special, what with the other weddings at the Burrow. What do you think?"

"I think it's wonderful, Harry and the most thoughtful idea I ever heard of. If we weren't in public I'd show you just how much I love the idea," she said with a grin. "You leave Mum to me. She always said she wanted my wedding to be something special so that's how I'll approach it. I'll talk to her when we get back from France," she said, her face glowing.

Harry couldn't help but smile and he gave her hand a squeeze. Then he said,

"You wrote that you had an idea about doing something about our separations. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, Harry, it's like this. I don't think I could spend too many years with us being apart so much so here's my plan. I signed a two year contract with the Harpies with a possible one year extension. They already said they want to pick up that option. I agreed. At the end of that third year I'm going to retire from Quidditch. I've been having talks with the Quidditch reporter from the Prophet and I think I might like to do that. He's looking to retire in a couple of years and we've worked out a deal where I'm going to start writing some pieces for his

sports column, a sort of insiders look at the game. If it works out after we both retire I'll go to work for the Prophet. What do you think?"

"If that's what you want to do I'm all for it. It may seem odd having you work for them, but I think that we can let bygones be bygones. And the timing sounds good. Looks like the food's arriving. We'll have some time this weekend to fill in more of the details."

"Hmm, yes, I guess we can find a few minutes to talk," Ginny said, laughing. Harry blushed and laughed again.

The dinner was everything Ginny had promised and Harry ate his fill. After the wonderful meal and Ginny's company Harry was in a decidedly contented mood. He settled the bill and the two walked out into the night air where he took in a deep breath and pulled Ginny to him. She looked up into his bright green eyes and smiled, a question on her face.

"At this moment and in this place, I'm very happy and not the least bit afraid to admit it...and accept it. Thank you, love," Harry said

"What for, Harry?"

"For loving me and allowing me to love you," he said quietly.

"That goes both ways, Harry," she said and lightly kissed him. "Now walk me home and let me show you how much I love you, my most wonderful man."

Harry could only smile in answer.

Harry's Future, Part 9

With his usual efficiency, Kreacher had the door to the Black house open before Harry had a chance to finish knocking. Harry was fine with that, especially this evening. He was tired and couldn't wait to drop into his comfortable chair in the study.

"Thanks, Kreacher. Something simple for dinner tonight will be fine."

"Kreacher will have Master Harry's dinner to him in a few moments," Kreacher replied as he took Harry's cloak and hat.

Harry trudged to his study and dropped into the upholstered chair. He closed his eyes and thought back over the events of the day. After spending the weekend with Ginny in Holyhead he started the day by seeing Ginny and the rest of the Harpies off on their trip to France for the Quidditch tournament. Depending on their success they could be gone for as much as two weeks. When he got to the office he found Maxwell and Milligan waiting for him. Using the information they had gathered so far they suggested to Harry that the raid should be early in the morning on Thursday. Based on the schedule for deliveries they should be able to bottle up everyone they had identified as being part of the operation.

After Milligan had left, Maxwell and Harry discussed the make up of the team they would need. Maxwell's recommendation for the leader of the new Special Tactical Squad was going to be Evelyn Muntab, the witch Harry had first met when they made the raid that resulted in the arrest of the 'source'. Maxwell was going to remain as the head of the squad still pursuing the last of Voldemort's followers. Muntab had been called up to Harry's office and after being informed of her elevation the three sat down and went through the plan. It was going to take a full dozen Aurors to do the job. There would be three to fly cover over the warehouse, four more to cover the outside of the building on the ground and five to go through the Knockturn Alley storefront and enter the warehouse from the portal.

Harry announced that he would be going along with the portal strike team and that Maxwell was going to be outside with the ground team. Both Maxwell and Muntab raised serious objections to this. Harry

gave them both time to vent all their arguments and overrode them by simply stating,

“Based on my observations so far, I believe I’m safe in saying that there isn’t an Auror in this department that is a powerful or as good with a wand as I am. It’s not a boast, just a statement of fact. This is too important and dangerous a situation to leave that kind of advantage back here. We are going to be splitting the strike team once inside so I want maximum firepower in there and I want you, Maxwell, outside if something goes wrong and we need to change plans. Understood?”

The two older Aurors looked at Harry and as his bespectacled green eyes bore into them they just nodded their agreement.

“Good. Get your team together and start drilling them on their stealthy movement and forced entry skills. Meet me here Wednesday morning at nine o’clock for a status report. I’ll be at Hogwarts tomorrow but I’ll be available if you need to reach me.”

By the time they were done it was time for lunch and Harry grabbed his now usual quick sandwich and tea. When he returned he found a message on his desk from the Public Relations Officer from the Minister’s Office indicating that there was a significant response to the first run of the ad he placed. While there were a few negative comments, along the lines that Harry was undermining the fine institution of the Aurors, the vast majority were complimentary and many including the sentiment that this was long overdue. Harry could only smile and hope that this boded well for the turn out. The afternoon consisted of documenting the assignments that had been made for the various new teams he was establishing and finalizing the number of new recruits that he was looking for. It was not an insignificant number. The Patrollers needed two Patrol Officers per shift for Diagon Alley, three shifts each day, seven days a week. Knockturn Alley was getting the same number but one Auror was to be matched with each Patroller for that duty. Hogsmeade would get one Patroller per shift and then there were those needed for the Azkaban Guard staff. The Minister had authorized a head count of forty for the new recruits and he would need every one of them.

Now he was home and in need of dinner, which just arrived, and then a bit of work on his lecture for tomorrow, then early to bed. By the time he crawled into bed he was barely able to keep his eyes open. His sleep was deep and uninterrupted. It had been a long time since he had a dream that would jerk him awake. Now, when he did dream, it invariably involved a certain redhead.

He awoke the next morning refreshed and in a good mood. He always looked forward to his trips to Hogwarts and today was no different. As usual, Kreacher had a good breakfast waiting for him when he came down after his shower and dressing. He also had his good cloak and hat ready as well as his leather briefcase with the Hogwarts crest and Harry's initials. Kreacher insisted that Harry always look his very best when going to Hogwarts.

"Master Harry is an important member of the Ministry and must look his best when he is on official business."

Harry had learned not to argue with the little elf. While he was normally very deferential and followed Harry's directions and suggestions to the letter, once he got an idea in his head there was simply no changing his mind. So when Harry stepped out onto the porch of the Black house, he did so looking every inch the proper wizard.

In the blink of an eye he was standing on the road leading up to Hogwarts. As was usual in late October the sky was overcast and the wind was blowing. Holding on to his hat with one hand he walked up to and through the gates and toward the main doors. As he approached the steps leading up to the doors he saw a small but familiar figure waiting. Abigail Westwood dashed down the stairs and ran up to Harry and gave him a big hug. Harry returned it as best he could with the one arm carrying his briefcase.

"Hello there, Miss Westwood. How are you this morning?" Harry asked.

"I'm fine, sir. I asked Professor Weasley if it was ok if I met you here. I'm to take you up to the Room of Requirements. It's been set up for your lecture," she said with her quiet voice.

“Thank you. I wasn’t sure where I was supposed to go this morning so that problem is neatly solved,” he said with a smile.

Side by side the two walked up to the doors which had been left slightly ajar. Harry gave a tug and the one side swung open and they went in. As they made their way up to the Room of Requirements Abigail looked up and Harry and asked,

“How is your investigation going, sir? Did the information I saw for you help?”

“It helped a great deal, Abigail. I can’t give you any details at the moment but based on what you provided we are hoping to wrap it all up by this week,” Harry said as he looked down at the diminutive psychic child with a smile. “You better be careful, Abigail. If you continue to be of this much help to us, I may try to steal you away and have you come work for me.”

Abigail’s eyes popped very wide and her mouth dropped open as she stopped walking. Harry stopped as well and looked at her.

“Do you mean that, sir? Would you really want me to come work for you and help with your investigations?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Well, I was kind of making a joke right then, but yes, Abigail. If you thought you would want to do that I think you could be immensely helpful. But that’s a ways off right now but it is something to think about.”

All the girl could say was,

“Wow.”

They continued their trek to the strange room that would become whatever the user wished for if they needed it enough. When the door swung open Harry could see that it was arranged in sections with one area set for Harry to lecture as a group and other areas for Bill and he to conduct practical exercises from beginners up through NEWT

candidates. Harry could see that nearly all the seats were already taken and Abigail gave him a big smile and then hurried over to a spot near the front. While this session was intended to be one for the students Harry noticed a few others in the audience to include Fleur, an older wizard he did not recognize and to his surprise, his boss, Director Grimsson. As Harry walked up to greet Bill, the others rose to meet him. He shook hands with Bill and then allowed himself to be swept up in Fleur's typically enthusiastic embrace. He received the customary kiss on both cheeks and then a second one on the right.

"That es from my seester, Gabrielle. Een her last letter she asked I geeve that to you but you are not to tell Geeny," the stunning witch said with a low chuckle.

Harry smiled back.

"Tell her thanks, Fleur. How's my big sister doing?"

"I am fine, 'arry," then she turned to the older wizard standing next to her. "Theese es Professor Jacque LeMond. 'e was my Defense Against the Dark Arts eenstructor at Beauxbaton. Bill and I invited him to 'ear you today. 'is engleesh ees not so good, but I will interpret for 'im."

"Bon jour, le professor. I'm very pleased to meet you," Harry said.

The older wizard smiled and shook Harry's hand while Fleur smiled brightly. The Mr. Grimsson stepped up.

"Good morning, Potter. Professor Weasley invited me here as well. Partly to meet Professor LeMond and partly to impress upon me how important your work here is to the school and the DADA program. It's my understanding that my predecessor used to complain about it quite a bit."

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

He knew his old bosses weren't that thrilled with the time Harry spent at the school but he didn't realize they had been so vocal about it.

“I hope you don’t mind it, sir. I think it’s an important part of what we are trying to do at the Ministry.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, Potter, but I thought I should see for myself.”

With that the visitors took their seats and Bill motioned for Harry to take his place at the podium and begin. Harry took his notes from his briefcase and placed them on the podium and then looked around the room at all the faces when something familiar caught his eye. On the wall behind the last row of students was the portrait of Professor Dumbledore. Harry gave a small smile of recognition when he saw the former Head wink at him. Clearing his throat Harry began,

“Professor Weasley has asked me to talk to you today about the integration of the various subjects you study here at Hogwarts in relation to Defense Against the Dark Arts. It’s something that I touched on with my very first lecture during my seventh year but today we are going to discuss it in more detail and then explore it through some practical exercises. We’ve assured the Headmistress that we’ll keep the damage to the castle to a minimum,” he said with a smile as the audience laughed.

He could see Fleur’s head tilted slightly to the side as she interpreted for Professor LeMond. He caught Abigail’s eye and she smiled and nodded. He proceeded with the rest of his lecture explaining how the mastery of basic magical techniques was an essential element of DADA. Wand work, spell casting and potion preparation and recognition were woven together with knowledge of magical creatures and a basic understanding of human nature colored with the intricacies that magical ability added. He took time to watch the faces in the crowd to gauge how well his talk was being received. He was pleased that no one had fallen asleep and that occasionally Grimsson would nod or jot down a note on a pad. Dumbledore remained as motionless as a normal portrait but Harry was sure his smile was wider.

When his talk was finished and he had fielded a number of questions, Bill Weasley stood and indicated it was time for the practical session and he directed class groups to different stations. Until lunch the

emphasis was on basic tasks with NEWT candidates leading the younger groups. Harry and Bill circulated among the groups answering questions or offering suggestions. Professor LeMond followed along and with Fleur providing the interpretation; he would also offer comments or suggestions. Director Grimsson continued to observe and take notes.

When the morning session concluded Bill Weasley dismissed the students and informed the guests that places were set for them at the Faculty table in the Great Hall. Bill and Fleur escorted Professor LeMond while Harry and Director Grimsson followed along.

"I have to say, Potter, that was a very impressive display you put on in there," Grimsson said. "I can understand the Headmistress' desire to have you full time here. I'm afraid she'll just have to stand in line," he concluded with a chuckle.

Harry smiled and gave one of his customary shrugs.

"Shrug if you like, Potter, but the work you are doing here might very well be as important as what you are doing at the Ministry. There has often been an adversarial relationship between the Ministry and Hogwarts. I guess I don't need to tell you that though. It's all so stupid, too, when you think about it. This institution is the source of all the talent for the Ministry. In a very real sense we can only be as good as the students that Hogwarts graduates," Grimsson said, his voice trailing off and his face looking thoughtful.

The two continued on to the Great Hall in silence. They bypassed the main door that served for the students and entered through the smaller door that was closer to the faculty table. The table had been rearranged to provide places on both sides of Professor McGonagall, one for Director Grimsson and one for Professor LeMond. Fleur sat next to him to continue to interpret. Harry had his place further down the table. He got a big wave and grin from Hagrid who had already taken his seat. He found a wrinkled piece of parchment on the table next to his plate. He picked it up and after unfolding it found a note in Hagrid's scrawl. It always amazed Harry that a quill existed that was

big enough for Hagrid's hand. He wondered if it was from a Hippogriff. The note read,

Cheers Harry,

We are all set for the try outs. I think the Centaurs should have an answer by then too.

Hagrid

Harry looked down the table and caught Hagrid's eye. He held up the paper and nodded. Hagrid winked back. By now the students had seated themselves and Professor McGonagall stood up and rapped on the table to get their attention.

"I would just like to take this opportunity to welcome several guests that are here today. On my right is Mr. Abernathy Grimsson, the recently appointed Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

This announcement was greeted with polite applause. The Director nodded and smiled.

"On my left, is Monsieur Le Professor Jacque LeMond who teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Beauxbaton Academy of Magic. He is here at the invitation of Professor Weasley to observe one of our special DADA sessions."

The applause level was slightly higher, possibly due to the seeming exotic nature of the visitor or more likely his association with Mrs. Bill Weasley, as the silver haired Fleur was something of a legend at Hogwarts.

"And of course returning to conduct that special session our very own Mr. Harry Potter."

The applause level went up several orders of magnitude to include groups of students standing and cheering. Harry could only smile and try and signal the students to settle down. The Headmistress had to

add her own authority by rapping on the table to get them to quiet down.

“Enjoy your lunch,” was all she said in conclusion.

As Harry usually did when he was sitting at the faculty table he let his eyes roam around the room and see what familiar faces he recognized. He saw, of course, all the third years who had been his students during his year long stint as Bill’s teaching assistant. But he also saw others that he knew. That coupled with his placement at the table prevented him from noticing that Professor McGonagall spent a good portion of her lunchtime with her head tilted towards either Director Grimsson or Professor LeMond. She didn’t need an interpreter as she was fluent in French. When lunch concluded Bill and Harry and their guests made their way back up to the Room of Requirements. The first through fourth years had been dismissed for their afternoon classes while the older students were back for additional, advanced work. The room had been reconfigured and the fifth through seventh years spent an arduous afternoon dealing with simulated, yet harrowing, situations that tested their knowledge across the gamut of wizarding skills. On several occasions a wrong step or flubbed attempt at a charm had left a student in a precarious situation. Harry would step in and stop the simulation and then walk the student through the proper actions. Unnoticed by Harry, both Grimsson and Professor LeMond had stopped participating and spent the rest of the afternoon watching Harry intently.

By the time the students had been dismissed they were tired but were all enthusiastically discussing what they had been put through. The word ‘cool’ could be heard numerous times.

“That was great, Harry. They’ll be talking this session up for weeks,” Bill said with a big smile.

“I will, too, Bill. It was a lot of fun,” Harry replied with a smile.

“Potter, can I have a moment?” the Director asked.

“Certainly, sir.”

“Let’s sit over here,” Grimsson said as he indicated a pair of chairs.

“Well, I have to say that this afternoon was every bit as impressive as this morning, perhaps more so. Its one thing to be able to keep a room full of people interested in what you’re saying and another to engage them one on one the way you were. It gives me every confidence that the recruits that you’ll soon have in hand will not lack for good training,” he said with a smile. “Do you recall what we were discussing on the way down to lunch this morning, Potter?”

“Yes, sir. That Hogwarts was the source of talent for the Ministry and it can only be as good as the students that graduate from here.”

“Exactly. The Ministry is still in a precarious situation, Potter. The Minister has been doing what he can to weed out those individuals that have proven to be, how shall I say, reluctant to embrace his philosophy. Despite everything that has happened, there are still those who think the Ministry needs to be a bastion of pure bloods. They consider Voldemort an aberration instead of a product of that thought process. The fact that he was actually only a half blooded wizard doesn’t seem to matter to them. The retirement of these people will be leaving vacancies all over the organization. Their replacements will come from here. We got lucky with you and Granger, Potter. We can’t trust to luck in the future. We need to be proactive and I’ve had a discussion with the Headmistress during lunch. I’d like your opinion.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Firstly, I’m suggesting internships. I know you and Ms. Granger spent a rather harrowing time between your six and seventh year. I’m not suggesting anything that serious but I think the timing would be perfect. A twelve month paid internship between their six and seventh years on both the enforcement and policy sides. I’m also suggesting that after you’ve had time to build up your department and get it running properly that you take a sabbatical and return to Hogwarts to teach full time for a year. That’s probably a few years out but the planning needs to be done now. And you most certainly will have the opportunity to continue to conduct these special sessions. That’s the basics of what I discussed with the Head. Any comments?”

"I think they're great ideas, sir, especially the sabbatical," Harry said with a grin. "The intern idea is pretty interesting. I certainly wouldn't send them out on patrols or missions but crime scene investigations, interrogations, that sort of thing would make sense. I'd imagine the policy side would offer a lot of interesting opportunities. I'd bet that Hermione could make good use of a sharp intern."

"Well, let's get your try out completed and resulting recruits settled and then we can start working on the rest. I'll have Ms. Granger involved as well," Grimsson said, looking at Harry. "Well done, Potter. I'm going to head back after I take my leave of the Headmistress."

"Yes, sir."

After the Director left, Bill waved Harry over to where he and Fleur had been talking to Professor LeMond. The Professor smiled at Harry's approach and offered his hand. Harry took it and smiled back.

"Harry, Professor LeMond has something he'd like to ask of you," Bill said.

Harry looked at the Professor but kept his ear tuned to Fleur. After the Professor had his say in French, Fleur offered the translation.

"Harry, Professor LeMond asks you to accept his invitation to come to Beauxbaton and to conduct a lecture and exercise similar to what you did today."

There was another stream of French and again Fleur's translation.

"Le Professor says that 'e understands you are very bizy and would ask you to consider coming in the spreng?" Fleur said with a question in her voice.

"Please tell the Professor that I would be happy to come if I can make the scheduling work," Harry said.

Fleur provided the translation and the Professor smiled and nodded his acknowledgement. Fleur gave Harry a big smile of the kind that

usually had Ron melting into his shoes. Bill offered Harry his hand again and said,

“Great job as usual, Harry. Thanks. You heading for home or staying for dinner?”

“I think I’m heading home, Bill. The next several days are likely to be very busy and I’m going to try for some early sleep. Once Ginny gets back from France do you think we can arrange for dinner or something together?”

“Oh, yes, ‘arry. That would be wonderful. I want to ‘ear all about ‘er adventures there,” Fleur chimed in.

“That’s great. Well, I better get a move on. See you all soon.”

Harry left the room and walked down to the entry foyer where he found Abigail Westwood waiting for him.

“Hello, sir. I just wanted to be able to say good bye and good luck. I can feel that something big is coming up soon, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. I’ll be sure to be careful. I appreciate that you look out for me, Abigail, but don’t get too preoccupied with it. You need to concentrate on your work here.”

“Yes, sir. I understand. Please be careful.”

“I will, Abigail,” Harry said and began to head to the door.

“Sir,” she called out.

“Yes?”

“Did you really mean what you said before? About me coming to work for you someday?”

Harry looked down into those big dark eyes.

“Yes I did, Abigail. If you should decide that’s what you want to do I’d be very happy to have you as part of my team.”

“Thank you, sir,” Abigail said with a big smile.

Harry smiled back and then left through the partly opened door. In less than fifteen minutes he had walked off the school grounds and Apparated back to the Black house. In less than an hour he was asleep.

The following day passed quickly for Harry. It started with his meeting with Maxwell and Muntab. For two hours they went through the details until they had everything set to their mutual satisfaction. The aerial and ground teams were leaving at midnight to be in position for when the strike team would enter the shop. Something that had been nagging at Harry since yesterday was resolved as well.

“We’ve been concentrating our efforts on the one wizard in the potions shop. What about the other four shops. Who’s running them and what’s going on inside there?”

“We asked those same questions of Milligan. The potions shop was the first one to change hands. He thinks it may be because the portal was already there or it was somehow the right place to put it after they took over. The other shops are all in a row with that one in the middle. It’s beginning to look like they share an ancient foundation, to what we don’t know. The other shops are still being run by the clerks that ran it before. Milligan’s informants tell him they are absolutely terrified of this guy and are keeping them running for him. Milligan is going to put a man in each shop when we hit the potions store. They’ll baby sit the clerks.”

“Ok. I can’t think of anything else, can either of you?” Harry asked.

“If we could we’d have already answered it before we came in here. We are as set as we can be. Any chance you’ll consider sitting this one out?” Maxwell asked.

“Nope, I’ll see you tomorrow at the rendezvous spot, Muntab. Maxwell, I’ll see you in Derbyshire when it’s over.”

“Yes, sir. I certainly hope so.”

Harry worked through the day. He went over the manpower requirements again and reviewed the test plan for the try outs. It was going to be quite a day for the applicants. Then he got a message to go see the Director who asked Harry to write out the answers to a couple of questions that had come in from the Minister on his progress with the reorganization. He also got word that Percy had become the Acting Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. He went home that night and after dinner and a few hours of reading he turned in. Sleep came slowly but when it did it was uninterrupted. Kreacher woke him early as instructed and he dressed in nondescript clothes that he usually wore when he was staying at the Weasleys and expected to be outside. Instead of a wizards robe he wore a plain jacket. He would be using his Invisibility Cloak when they went through the portal and he wanted no further hindrance. After a quick breakfast he left the Black house and Disapparated to his favorite spot by Gringotts and then made his way towards the entrance to Knockturn Alley. As he approached the other members of the strike team led by Muntab converged on him.

Without any exchange of words they quickly made their way down the stairs to the Alley and just as quickly Harry made his way through the front door of the potions shop, his wand already drawn. The ‘proprietor’ looked up from what he was reading on the counter top and had only enough time to register that someone was approaching him before Harry calmly said “Stupefy” and the foreign wizard went down like felled tree.

The strike team was right behind Harry and Muntab went around the counter and had the unconscious man bound in ropes in an instant. She looked at Harry.

“Milligan has the other stores secured and one of his will be on the door here.”

Harry nodded and simply said,

“Let’s go.”

He led them down the stairs slowly until he was sure no one was in the basement then they hurried to the portal. He looked at Muntab, who then looked back at her team,

“You know what the plan is. No talking. Mr. Potter and the first three go right, my team left and along the wall. As planned,” she looked at Harry and said. “When you’re ready, sir.”

Harry slipped through the portal and as soon as he was on the other side he took two steps to the right with his wand drawn to cover the others. The next three went through and stepped into a narrow passage formed by stacked boxes. Muntab and the other two came through and went left, down the narrow aisle to the far wall and then went right along the outer wall towards the front of the warehouse. Harry slipped on the Invisibility Cloak and moved forward. As he did, he felt that same rising anger that struck him that night in the backyard of the Weasleys when he confronted the housebreakers. Once again he was approaching wizards that had embraced the dark side and were threatening all that he had fought for and so many of his family and friends had died to preserve. His grip on his wand tightened until his knuckles turned white. As he approached the opening to the large area that was occupied by the table where the other gang members congregated Harry could hear their voices and he knew that there was a fair number there. He paused and let his hand slip out of the cloak and he signaled his three to start moving up. The dull grey of their robes blended into the shadows as they crept along the crates. He then turned back to the makeshift room and took another step then let the cloak slide off to the floor.

The plan called for Harry to create a diversion and then stun as many of the gang as he could while his back up came forward to deal with the rest. Muntab’s team would have circled around by then and taken down anyone trying to flee to the front. It had been suggested that Harry create some blinding light or deafening noise. He said he would take care of it. What he did was a bit more dramatic. He had his wand pointed directly at the center of the wall behind the table around which eight wizards sat and another two were behind it from where Harry stood. As he stepped out into the light he bellowed “Confringo”.

A significant portion of the wall exploded outward but there was enough of a back blast that everyone on the side facing Harry went down in a heap. Those closest to Harry went over backwards in their chairs and were struggling to get up as the three Aurors backing Harry rushed forward and began to cast stupefying spells. Harry had moved to his left, toward the front of the warehouse. He could hear shouts and the sounds of spells being cast. He saw one unfamiliar looking wizard attempting to flee out a side door. When Harry shouted for him to stop the wizard turned on Harry and began to pull his wand. Harry instinctively shouted 'Expelliarmus' with the result being the wizard's wand flying out of sight and the wizard sent crashing through the door into the morning light. Harry rushed to the now missing door to see one of Maxwell's crew binding the fallen wizard with ropes from his wand. He looked over his shoulder and saw that several more of Maxwell's men had entered through the blasted wall and were helping his three to subdue the stunned men in the main room. He continued on to the front of the building, where the sounds of fighting had subsided. He came upon several fallen and bound wizards with several more sprawled just outside the partially opened double barn doors. Muntab was on her knees examining a fallen Auror. There was a broken crate on the floor near him. She looked up.

"A stray curse from one of them knocked the crate loose. Looks like shoulder and head injuries but not too bad."

Harry nodded and took a moment to look around. He raised his wand and said, 'Lumos' while imagining the light produced as a beam instead of the usual globe. He pointed the intense white lance of light down each aisle that was formed by the high stacks of crates. The first several produced nothing but as he moved his way towards the wall that Muntab and her team used to approach the front of the building he thought he saw a flicker of movement.

"Whoever you are, step out into the light. This building is surrounded, as is the potions store. You can't escape."

The figure that stepped out into the light surprised Harry for a moment. It was Travers, possibly the last real Death Eater still at large. His face was screwed up in a look of pure hatred. He pointed

his wand at Harry who flicked off the light and shouted 'Expelliarmus' just as Travers began to shout 'Avada... but he never made it. The red beam of Harry's charm hit the Death Eater square in the chest and as the wand flew away the dark wizard likewise was hurled backwards like a rag doll to crash to the floor tens of feet further down the aisle, which proceeded to collapse as the crates on either side toppled down from the effects of the spell. Harry rushed down what was left of the aisle and began to levitate the heavy boxes out of the way until he was able to reach Travers. Several Aurors had converged on the spot from the other direction.

It was obvious that the man was dead. His chest was crushed and he was bleeding freely from the nose and mouth. His eyes were open in a look of shock. As Harry looked down his shoulders sagged. He looked up at the two Aurors and saw them looking back at him.

"Make sure the aisles are all checked for anyone else. In twos, I don't want anyone wandering around in here by themselves," Harry said quietly.

"Yes, sir," they responded.

He slowly walked back to the front of the building. The big doors had been pulled aside and Maxwell was there talking to Muntab. They looked up at Harry as he walked out of what was left of the aisle. He looked at Maxwell.

"You'll want to see what's back there. I'm pretty sure it's Travers."

Maxwell's eyes went wide and he hurried past Harry. He then looked at Muntab.

"Can we get him out of here ok?" he inquired about the injured Auror.

"Yes, sir. We had St. Mungo's on standby just in case. They are sending a team out to pick him up. Several of the ones you stunned with that blast need some work too. Contusions, wood splinters, that sort of thing," she said.

“Fine, well it looks like the worst is over. If you can spare anyone have them sweep the building and make sure there isn’t a basement or anywhere else we didn’t think of.”

Harry stepped out into the morning sunlight. It was chilly but at least the sun felt warm on his face. He looked around and saw the inert bound forms of the captured gang members being floated to the front of the building. All told there must have been close to twenty of them. There were three muggle lorries parked around one side, one with crates waiting to be unloaded. Milligan was going to have his hands full tracing all this stuff. Maybe Abigail might have some insight into it. Harry walked over to a low rail fence that must have been the last section of a much larger, no longer existing barrier. He sat down on the top rail and looked back at the structure. The exterior was quite weathered but it didn’t appear that there was any second storey or attic to worry about. A basement might be another issue. Maxwell came out to find him and told him that firstly another dozen Aurors had come through the portal to help deal with the number of gang members and secondly that it was indeed Travers and that ended the search for Voldemort’s Death Eaters.

“You’ve just put me out of job, sir.”

“No, I don’t think so. You’re due for a new assignment anyway,” Harry said. “How does Deputy Chief sound to you?”

“Sound interesting. I don’t think we’ve ever had one of those before.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Harry said. “But my job is getting bigger and bigger and I’m going to need an experienced hand that I can delegate things to. You’re the man.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your first orders are to take charge here. Get this bunch bagged and tagged and sent to Azkaban. Get Milligan and his crew out here to catalogue that mess in there. Once we know what we’ve got and where it came from I’d imagine more than us will be involved in how it’s pursued.”

"Yes, sir. I'll get right on it, and thank you, sir."

"Wait a few months and see what the job's like before you decide to thank me," Harry said with a tired laugh.

He pushed himself off the rail, shook hands with his new Deputy and walked back into the building. He looked around and saw that the team from Saint Mungo's had arrived. He made his way towards where the action had begun and he saw that the room had been cleared and through the hole in the wall he could see another of the St. Mungo's team attending to several bound gang members under the watchful eyes of half a dozen Aurors. He picked up his Invisibility Cloak and walked back to the portal. When he stepped through he saw one of Milligan's investigators making a cursory check of the items in the basement. The witch started as Harry came through then relaxed. Harry looked around and said rather sharply,

"Why are you down here by yourself?"

"We had word that the situation was under control. Even the medics were allowed through, sir," she replied nervously.

"Unacceptable. There are plenty of places in there to hide," he jerked his finger over his shoulder towards the portal and beyond. "I'm sending someone else down."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

Harry trudged up the stairs and called out,

"It's the chief, I'm coming up."

As he came up through the portal he saw Milligan and several other investigators poking around the store.

"Milligan," he barked. "You've got ten seconds to get someone else down in that basement. No one goes anywhere alone, inside or out, in this pesthole. Is that understood?"

“Yes, sir. I understand completely,” the wizard said as he pointed to the nearest wizard and motioned to the opening in the floor.

The selected man hurried down into the cellar without a backward glance. Harry then walked out of the shop and into the alley. He saw that several more investigators were standing about watching the storefronts on either side of the potions shop. He looked all around the Alley with its disreputable looking storefronts. The place was deserted. This much law enforcement had sent the usual denizens scurrying for cover. He motioned over one of the Aurors and said,

“Go in and get Milligan.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said and then ducked into the shop.

A moment later out came Milligan and the impromptu messenger.

“Yes, sir,” Milligan said deferentially, already sensitized to his boss’ mood.

“I want each of the shops along here that were taken over examined. If there is even a trace of illegal activity, shut it down. We are going to start cleaning up this dump starting right now. Today is Thursday, by Tuesday next week I want a plan for how you’re going to get to the bottom of all the illegal activity down here.”

“Yes, sir,” came the carefully toned reply.

Harry nodded and began to make his way toward the stair way when he stopped and turned. He called back to Milligan,

“Milligan, one last thing.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Good work from you and your team. Your information was pretty much spot on. Thank you,” Harry said.

“Yes sir. You’re welcome, sir.”

Harry nodded a last time and then walked up the stairs. At the top were two large tough looking Aurors whose names he couldn't recall. They were blocking the stairs from the few witches and wizards who were out and about at this hour, it still not being nine o'clock yet. He recognized one as being the reporter he met in the Minister's office a while ago.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Potter. A moment of your time, please."

"What is it?"

"Can you tell me what is going on down there? These gentlemen won't let me through. I am a member of the press after all."

"You're correct. They won't let you down there yet. If they had I'd bust them right down to bathroom cleaners at Azkaban. The crime scene isn't secure yet and no one gets down there until it is, even members of the press. A press release will be issued shortly. Good day, sir."

Harry nodded to the Aurors who nodded back and then continued to glare at the onlookers. Harry walked up Diagon Alley and saw George looking out of his shop door towards him. Harry gave him a quick smile and a thumbs up as he passed. George smiled back. He got to the wall by the entrance to the Cauldron and stopped long enough to Disapparate back to the Ministry. There was a buzz in the lobby as it was just around the time that most of the Ministry workers reported in. The movement of a large amount of Aurors had not gone unnoticed and as Harry made his way to an elevator he could hear a great deal of whispered conversation.

His first stop was the Auror common room as he had come to think of it to grab a cup of tea. It was, of course, empty but the tea water was hot and he was soon on his way to his office with a full cup. Less than ten minutes had past when a figure appeared in his doorway. It was Grimsson.

"How'd did things go, Potter?"

"Better than we had a right to hope for. It appears we got them all, at least those directly associated with the plot. We had one man injured

by a falling crate. We also found the last surviving Death Eater. He didn't survive the encounter. Maxwell made the identification. It was Travers. Oh, by the way. I've appointed Maxwell as my Deputy. He's in charge of the scene."

"Good idea, you need someone to back you up. Good work. I'll wait until the report is filed for all the details. Thank you, Potter."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

When the Director left, Harry leaned back in his chair. The day was barely begun and he was already exhausted. His profligate use of magic was taking its toll on him. He sipped more of the tea but he knew it would take a caffeine IV directly into his blood to neutralize his fatigue. He wasn't exactly sure what he had been doing to use the time, but around noon Maxwell appeared in his office.

"Sir, the crime scene is secure and handed over to Milligan and his team. All the prisoners are being transferred to Azkaban. The total was nineteen excluding the dead Travers. After a cursory look around Milligan figures besides his people, the International office will be involved as well as the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts folks. It's quite a variety of stuff they had. Should prove interesting to find out what they had in mind for it all."

Harry merely nodded and waved Maxwell into a chair.

"I told the Director about your promotion and he agreed, so that's final. I'd like you to come with me for the tryouts. I want you to see what we'll have to work with. We'll both be heavily involved in the training so..." Harry's voice trailed off. "One other thing. This was my last field mission."

Maxwell looked at Harry closely. He thought he knew the reason why but was soon proved wrong. He was thinking of Travers.

"I realize that despite the training I start to lose my objectivity out there. I get angry and I can't afford to let that happen. It puts too many people in jeopardy. I'm surprised the roof didn't come down when I blew that wall out."

"That's the advantage of those old post and beam buildings. The walls just keep the weather out. I understand what you're saying, sir. We'll keep you under wraps until it looks like the world is coming to an end and then we'll wheel you out," Maxwell said with a lopsided grin.

"Well hopefully with some good work we can keep it from going that bad," Harry said with a tired smile. "Make sure you get statements from everyone involved and pull them together into a report. You're in charge here. I'm going home before I fall asleep at my desk. See you in the morning."

"Yes, sir."

Maxwell stood up and left the office ahead of Harry. Harry slowly made his way to the lobby and as a testament to his physical state he took the elevator disguised as a telephone booth up to street level. From there he walked back to the Black house. He didn't want to risk Apparating when he was so tired. It was a good way to get splinched. As always Kreacher was there to greet him. His big eyes looked at his Master with concern.

"Master Harry does not feel well," he said not as a question but a statement of fact.

"It was a tough morning, Kreacher. We did a good job but it wasn't easy. I'm going to go sit in my study for a while. If I need anything, I'll call you."

"Yes, Master Harry," but his look was concerned.

Harry walked down the hall to his study and he flopped into his large upholstered chair. He let himself sink into the cushions and closed his eyes. He was beginning to second guess how he handled things. Did he really need to be there? It turned out there were more of the foreign wizards than first thought but the Aurors were better trained and had the element of surprise. Was he just showing off or trying to prove that he did indeed deserve to be the head of the Aurors? Was killing Travers really necessary? After all the work he had done with

Professor Flitwick he should have been able to disarm the Death Eater and taken him alive. It would have just been postponing the inevitable since all the captured Death Eaters were sentenced to execution by being put through the Veil but that at least had the weight of correct legal procedure behind it, not a result of an angry application of force. These questions were swirling around in his mind when he heard a soft knock on his study door.

"Harry, dear, are you in there?"

"Mum? What are you doing here?" Harry said as the door was pushed open.

"A got a visit from Kreacher just now. He told me 'Master Harry was very troubled and should not be by himself right now'. He was very insistent," Mrs. Weasley said.

"I didn't realize house elves were so perceptive," Harry said quietly.

Mrs. Weasley came in and dragged Harry's desk chair over to sit across from him. She sat down and looked at his tired eyes and sad face.

"What's the trouble, dear?"

"I killed someone today, Mum. A Death Eater, Travers."

"Ah, that one, yes. Good riddance to him, but he's not the one I'm interested in. It's you I'm worried about, Harry. We've been down this road before and it's a trip I'm not going to let you take again. Talk to me, Harry. Get it out in the open."

It wasn't until some two hours later that Mrs. Weasley kissed Harry on the forehead and said good bye to him in the foyer.

"Be well, Harry dear. We'll expect you and Ginny at the Burrow when she returns from France," she said, her eyes locked firmly on his.

"Thank you, Mum. I appreciate your coming here but I'm sorry I had to bother you," Harry said quietly.

“Harry, dear. You are family. You will never be a bother. Remember that,” she said kindly.

“Yes, Mum.”

She stepped out onto the front porch and with a final smile at Harry, she Disapparated. Harry gave a small shake of his head and watched Kreacher close the door. He then fixed the little house elf with a green eyed stare. The big liquid eyes looked back at him. He finally asked,

“Why did you feel that was necessary, Kreacher?”

“Master Harry was feeling very bad. Kreacher knew this. It is Kreacher’s task to make sure that Master Harry is well. Kreacher knew that Mistress Ginny’s mother has helped make Master Harry well when he felt this way before. So Kreacher brought her here. If Master Harry had injured his arm or his leg Kreacher would have brought someone from St. Mungo’s. It is all the same.”

Harry looked down at Kreacher and gave a little smile and said,

“I’m going to go take a nap. Wake me up when dinner is ready, please,” he said. “And thanks, Kreacher.”

“Master Harry is most welcome.”

By the time the next morning dawned Harry was feeling much better. With the combination of a good dinner and plenty of sleep he was able to face the new day with a much better outlook than when he said good bye to the old one. When he arrived at his office the next morning he found a copy of the Daily Prophet on his desk. The banner headline read,

‘Major Smuggling Ring Smashed’ and in slightly smaller print underneath

‘Aurors Nab Gang That Terrorized Knockturn Alley’.

The article went on to describe the events of the day fairly accurately. He noticed one sentence that stated that 'while Auror Chief Harry Potter was unavailable for comment reliable sources revealed he personally led the raid on the Derbyshire headquarters and during the fight that ensued was forced to kill a fugitive Death Eater known only as Travers who refused to surrender when so ordered'. He thought how simple it all seemed when set down in print. They included comments from 'newly appointed Deputy Chief Maxwell and Magical Investigative Unit team leader Milligan'. He read how the initial information about the 'unusual situation' in Knockturn Alley was brought to official attention by concerned merchants, several of whom, while wishing to remain anonymous, expressed their appreciation that Chief Potter took their concerns seriously. They concluded the story by indicating that the investigation continues and details will be reported as they become available.

He leafed through the paper and came across the ad he had placed. He folded the paper and put it on the corner of the desk. He also found a first draft of the report from yesterday. He sat down and began to read through it. He was interested in the statements from Muntab and her team about what happened at their end of the building. It appears they had caught them just as they were preparing to load up the two empty lorries. He'd be interested to know where they intended to send the contraband. Milligan's contribution pertained mostly to the securing of the other shops and a cursory examination of the contraband. He stated he was unprepared to draw any conclusion until a thorough examination and cataloguing of the material was conducted. He estimated it would likely take several weeks to do so.

Harry made a few notes to cover his actions although the statements from his team dealt with a large share of it. He was tempted to excise several statements that seemed to overplay his role but he decided against it. It was, after all, what they believed they saw.

He made a few final notes and walked it back down to Maxwell's office, leaving it for him. When he got back to his office he found a note summoning him up to the Minister's office. He made his way up there and as he approached the secretary she looked up and said,

“You’re to go right in, Mr. Potter.”

“Um, thank you.”

It was the first time that the elderly witch had ever spoken to him. He made his way to the door and knocked. Shacklebolt’s voice called him in. Harry swung the door open and walked in. The Minister was seated behind the desk. He waved Harry in and indicated the chair across from him. Harry sat down and waited.

“I understand congratulations are in order, Potter. I saw the Prophet this morning and Director Grimsson stopped by. I assume a full report will be available soon.”

“Yes, sir. I reviewed the first draft this morning and I was returning it to Maxwell with my notes when your summons came. It should be ready to submit to the Director tomorrow morning.”

“Excellent. I have to say, Harry, that this was quite a feat for your first major operation. I presume this got started with what you were relating to me when we had that first meeting about reorganizing the Aurors.”

“Yes, sir. As it was stated in the article, the merchants from Diagon Alley were the ones that tipped us off to what was going on. At least as much as they could see,” Harry replied.

“Not us, Harry. You. They tipped you off and you developed the situation,” the Minister rumbled. “I also read that you were the one that led the raid on the warehouse. Did you feel that that was absolutely necessary, Harry?”

“Yes, I did, sir. I felt our knowledge of the number of gang members we would encounter was a bit fuzzy. I felt we needed to have maximum power available,” Harry said, looking directly at the Minister. “I was wrong. It appears I have what the muggles refer to as ‘anger issues’. I have no business being in the field. That’s already been decided.”

Shacklebolt pursed his lips and sat back in his chair, looking at Harry over steepled fingers. Then he nodded once.

“You’ve saved me the unpleasant task of having to forbid you from leading any more missions. Firstly, you’re too important to what we need to do here to have you risk yourself like that. Secondly, I’ve also had some concerns about how you might react in these kinds of situations. I was willing to risk it when you were in the company of senior Aurors but not anymore,” Shacklebolt said with a smile to take some of the sting out of his comments.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied matter-of-factly.

“I also had the chance to discuss with Director Grimsson about his ideas to cultivate and expand the ties you’ve established with Hogwarts. I agree entirely. Previous occupants of this office tended to view Hogwarts as a competing center of power in our community. That was foolishness. I agree with Grimsson that it is the principle resource for the Ministry and our part of the wizarding world. I intend to build on what you’ve started, Potter, and rely on you to help us with this effort.”

“I’ll be glad to help, sir,” Harry replied.

“Excellent. Well, that’s all I have for this morning. Let’s get back to work.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied as he rose and then left the office.

Harry's Future, Part 10

Harry sat at the small table that had been placed for him and his deputy, Maxwell, on the dais normally occupied by the faculty table. It was the second Saturday in November and it was time for the tryouts to select candidates for the Patroller squads Harry was developing. The tryouts were scheduled to begin at nine in the morning and when Harry arrived at eight there were at least one hundred people lined up outside the Hogwarts main gate. As he walked past he was hailed with numerous greetings and he saw a number of familiar faces. It looked like half of the DA had showed up. Prominently situated near the head of the line was Ron Weasley. Harry stopped a moment and shook hands with his best friend.

"How long have you been waiting here, Ron?" Harry had asked.

"Been here since sunrise, Harry. I kipped at the store last night," he said with a grin.

Harry smiled and made his way up to the castle and the Great Hall. Breakfast had been moved up and the Hall had already been cleaned up and some tables rearranged. By mutual agreement Harry was present only as an observer as was Maxwell. All administrative and testing duties were assigned to the Testing Director and her staff. This was so no charges of any favoritism could be leveled at Harry after the selections were announced. He was expected to make a short welcome and introduction and then spend the rest of the day observing and taking care of some personal business. Leaning on the wall was a package wrapped in brown paper. It was approaching nine and Harry watched as several elderly witches finished placing application forms on the long house tables. He wondered why everyone associated with the testing efforts were always senior citizens but he guess it had something to do with experience.

Speaking, or thinking, of experiences, the last few weeks had some significant ones. Since the raid that shut down the smugglers he had received word that the Board of Governors of Hogwarts had consented to the use of the Great Hall for the wedding with the stipulation that they all be invited. Ginny had returned home a few days early from France, the Harpies having made it to the semi-finals

before being eliminated by a strong team from Germany. That weekend the dinner that Harry had suggested to Fleur and Bill turned into a grand affair at the Burrow to include Angelina and Hermione. When the young ladies got to talking about wedding plans, Ginny let slip what Harry had proposed and it created quite a discussion. Angelina and Hermione both thought the idea was brilliant but Mrs. Weasley had some objections centering, just as Harry had surmised, about the Burrow being something of a tradition in the making. However, once Harry had the chance to explain his reasoning and Ginny sitting there with her pleading expression Mrs. Weasley began to soften. When the other girls, backed by Fleur, commented how fantastic it would be and what a social event it would make coupled with the interest that always was attached to anything involving Harry, she started to come around and by the end of the evening she was enthusiastically discussing the plans with her daughters, current and pending.

He had also taken delivery of the custom broom for Abigail which he intended to present to her today and Ginny was due to arrive around ten o'clock to give the diminutive witch some lessons. He was brought back to the here and now by the sound of the clock in the corridor chiming the hour of nine and shortly there after he could hear the sounds of voices as the prospective candidates filed up from the gates and through the main door. They were ushered in by the testing team with instructions to move toward the front of the Hall, find a seat and fill out the form they would find there. There was a significant buzz in the room as people filed down the aisles between the tables and found seats. Harry looked out over the crowd and saw Ron at the near end of the Gryffindor table.

He also saw Katie Bell and one of the Patil sisters, he couldn't figure out which one from where he sat. Terry Boot and Michael Corner were sitting together filling out forms and he spotted other former DA members Anthony Goldstein and Alicia Spinnet, one of Harry's former Quidditch teammates.

He also recognized some faces of students who had graduated some years ahead of Harry and not a few who were from last years seventh years and some sixth years who weren't going for their NEWTs. There were also a fair number of people who were obviously long

gone from Hogwarts before Harry ever arrived. All in all he estimated there were over three hundred witches and wizards in the Hall.

"Looks like a pretty good turn out, sir," Maxwell said.

"Yes, it does. Better than I expected."

"Well, Harry," came a familiar voice from behind him. "I would imagine your success with the smugglers ring has something to do with the turn out," Professor McGonagall said from her place at the faculty table.

"Yes, ma'am. I suppose you're right. I just hope they're serious about it."

"Oh, I think based on what I've seen of the examiners test plan, anyone who isn't will be weeded out in short order," she said with a wry smile.

Harry smiled and nodded. It was going to be a tough day for sure. At twenty minutes past nine Harry stood up and walked over to the podium. He used the gavel to get everyone's attention.

"Good morning everyone. I'm Harry Potter, Chief of the Aurors office," at which point he had to stop as everyone began to applaud. "Thank you, but that's not necessary. I should be applauding all of you for coming out here today. The turn out is much better than I could have hoped for. As I hope you are aware from the advertisement, we are looking for new members to the expanded Aurors office. At the Minister's direction we have been reorganizing and expanding the scope of that office and those of you who are successful today will become the Patrollers Unit. You will be the face of the Department and for many, the Ministry, as you will be dealing on a daily basis with the public. Over time there will be opportunities for those that qualify to move into the more traditional rolls of the Aurors but as of today, anyone wishing to become a full Auror will first be spending time getting to know every nook and cranny of Diagon and Knockturn Alleys and Hogsmeade. That includes Azkaban as well. I can promise a lot of hard work, but I believe it will be a challenging and rewarding career," Harry smiled as he said this.

"I would like to take a moment to introduce the recently appointed Deputy Chief Maxwell. He and I will be taking a personal interest in the training of those who are selected so you'll get to know us well. Also, this is the last you will see or hear from either of us in an official capacity today. The Director of Testing and her staff will have charge of everything else that happens for the rest of the day. This is to make sure that absolute impartiality is the order of the day. For those of you who make it, things will be tough enough. You don't want the notion of favoritism hanging over your heads. Well, that's all I have for you today. Oh, I almost forgot. For those of you who are still in your six or seventh years and make the cut. You will not be called for training until the end of the school year. We want you to finish your year out, especially seventh years. So again, thank you for coming out here today and the best of luck to you."

Harry stepped away from the podium as a fresh wave of applause broke out. The testing staff soon had this quieted down and got on with the business of getting the forms filled out and collected. Harry went and sat back down with Maxwell. The older Auror looked over at Harry.

"There's a lot of good will out there as far as you're concerned, sir."

"We'll see how long that lasts after most find out they didn't make the grade," he said with a rueful smile.

It was about fifteen minutes latter when the announcement was made that everyone should make their way to the Quidditch pitch and to report to the station that had their last name initial displayed above it.

"Well, guess I'll go and take a look around and see what we have to work with," Maxwell said.

"I'll be along in a little while. I have some business here and I'd like them to get started without too many distractions."

"Good idea, see you later, sir."

"Well, Harry. It seems you're off to a good start," the Headmistress said from behind him.

Harry turned in his chair and replied,

"Yes, ma'am. So far so good. I saw more than a few familiar faces."

"Yes, I noticed that Ron Weasley was right down front."

"Yes, ma'am. I had heard that he was getting bored with becoming a rich business man. He'll be a good man to have on board if he makes it."

"You have doubts?"

"No, not doubts. I'm just trying to maintain my neutrality and not jinx anything," Harry said with a laugh.

The Headmistress chuckled and then said,

"Harry, when you have the opportunity, Professor Dumbledore would like to see you."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm expecting Ginny here at ten and we have a little something to attend to and then I'll come right up," he said.

"I'll let him know and we'll see you soon."

The Headmistress left and Harry followed soon after and stood out on the steps leading down from the main door. He could just make out the tail end of the hopefuls as they were making their way into the Stadium. He allowed his eyes to roam over the school grounds and the other views that he had come to know so well. How long he stood there he couldn't say but he was brought back to the here and now by a most welcome voice.

"Hello, handsome."

He looked down to see Ginny smiling up at him from the bottom of the staircase. He smiled back.

“Hello, beautiful, it’s wonderful to see you.”

She hurried up the stairs and they spent some time just holding on to each other. She then gave him one of her heartfelt kisses and then looked up at him.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Pretty well, actually. Must have been over three hundred people. A bunch of former DA members too, including your brother, Ron.”

“I’m not surprised after what you told me. Who else did you see?”

Harry described who was there as they walked back into the castle arm in arm.

“Wow, that’s amazing Harry, but again I shouldn’t be surprised. I don’t think you appreciate how much we all looked up to you in those days. These days, too. I think Hermione was right, you were born to do this.”

“When did she say that?” Harry asked.

“She told me right after she told you. We talk a lot, even if it’s mostly by owl these days. She told me about the conversation she had with you one day in your office. She said you were a born leader. These people see that, too,” she concluded looking at him in admiration.

“Thanks, but you better find my air valve pretty quick,” he said with a laugh.

She laughed too, after smacking his arm. By now they were back in the Great Hall and Harry was picking up the wrapped package he had brought with him.

“This is it. I hope she likes it.”

“Oh, Harry, how could she not. It’s such a great idea, she’ll love it.”

“Now we just have to find her,” Harry said.

“No problem, my love. I took care of that with an owl a couple of days ago. She’ll be here in about five minutes. I just hope she didn’t ‘see’ any of this and have her surprise spoiled,” Ginny said thoughtfully.

They sat and talked for a bit until they heard footsteps in the corridor. They looked toward the door and saw the diminutive girl enter the Hall. When she caught sight of them she gave a little yell and then dashed down the aisle between two sets of tables right into the outstretched arms of Ginny.

“Hello, little sister, how are you?” Ginny asked as she hugged the girl whose feet were now off the floor.

“I’m really great, thanks. It’s so good to see you,” her voice muffled in Ginny’s shoulder.

After another squeeze Ginny set Abigail down who immediately went to Harry and wrapped her arms around him.

“Hello, sir. I’m glad to see you, too.”

Harry smiled down at her and said,

“And it’s always good to see you, Abigail.”

He then lifted her up and sat her on the top step to the dais so they were more or less eye to eye. She sat with her hands clasped in her lap and she was looking at Harry with those big dark eyes that he swore could look right into your soul.

“Abigail, do you know why we asked to see you today?”

“Because you missed me?” she said with an impish grin.

“Well, yes that is true, but we had something more specific in mind,” Harry said with a laugh.

"No, sir," came her quiet, breathless reply. "I try not to look for you too much. Professor McGonagall and I had a talk about privacy and I've been practicing on only letting big things come through."

"Ok, well, I wanted to tell you that you were very helpful in our capturing those smugglers and I wanted to give you a reward."

"But you don't have to do that, sir. You've already given me so much," she said.

Harry looked at Ginny in what she came to know as his 'here we go again' look.

"That might be true, but since this was so important, I'm going to give it to you anyway. And here it is," he said as he laid the narrow package on her lap.

Abigail looked at it with eyes wide, or wider than usual. Then she looked up at Harry and Ginny.

"Go ahead, Abigail, open it up," Ginny urged.

Abigail's small, deft fingers made short work of the string and paper. What emerged was a two thirds scale broom similar in style to the Nimbus 2000 but with delicately styled footrests and the initials AW done in elegant script. The small girl sat there blinking and as she looked back at Harry and Ginny her eyes were near to overflowing.

"It's beautiful, sir, but I won't be able to use it very well," she said in a barely audible voice.

"I think otherwise, Abigail. That is a special broom made to just your size and with special spells to make it easier to fly and maneuver. Ginny is here to help you with that. Madame Hooch has permitted you two to use her training area to practice," Harry said.

"Right now, sir?"

"Right now, Abigail. Go get your cloak," Ginny said.

“Oh, wow,” was all she said as she jumped up off the stair, wrapped Harry and Ginny in a shared hug and then tore up the aisle and out of the Hall.

“That was really terrific, Harry. You have a real knack for picking out presents for people,” she said as she reached up and kissed his cheek.

Faster than either of them thought possible Abigail returned with her cloak and she picked up the new broom and held it close. She looked up at Harry and said,

“Will you be coming too, sir?”

“I have to go up to the Headmistress’ office first, Abigail. It’s probably best you have just one teacher and no spectators while you’re trying out your new broom. I’ll stop by when I’m done,” Harry replied.

He did walk them to the main door, however. Ginny gave him a short kiss and with a smile walked with Abigail to the practice yard. Harry turned and made his way up the flights of stairs and was soon outside the entrance to the Heads office, which was already opened. He climbed the last flight of stairs and passed through the outer room to the office door. His knock was greeted by the Headmistress’ voice.

“Come in, Potter.”

Harry entered and took a seat in the chair indicated by Professor McGonagall.

“Good morning, Harry,” offered Professor Dumbledore from his portrait.

“Good morning, sir.”

“First of all, Harry, congratulations on your success with the smuggling ring. I understand that it went well.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry replied. “It went fairly well, although it could have gone better.”

“Ah, yes, the matter of Travers. I know you must feel badly about it, you wouldn’t be who you are if you didn’t, but try not to let it bother you too much. It was his choice after all.”

“I suppose so, but it demonstrated that I shouldn’t be out there. I get angry and it clouds my judgment so I’ve decided I’m not going on any more field missions. The Minister was going to forbid it anyway, but I saved him the trouble,” Harry said.

“I understand, Harry. But what I really wanted to discuss with you is the status of the portals. Ms. Granger told me what she had found out, of course, but there is still a great deal we don’t know, and I don’t think we are in a position to ask Durmstrang about it,” Dumbledore said. “Unfortunately, I’m not in any condition to investigate myself. Do you have any plans regarding it, Harry?”

“I have my investigators checking the entire contents of both buildings, sir. Right now the portal is off limits until we know what everything is in there and that it’s safe to begin studying the portal. Its discovery has created quite a stir in the Ministry and there are several groups wanting to take charge but right now it’s still a crime scene so I have control. I was thinking of asking Bill Weasley to take a look. He’s had a lot of experience with strange things.”

“Not a bad idea, Harry. And once things are safe enough, you might consider having Abigail Westwood see what she can ‘see’. We have no idea what the extent of her talent is so I can’t imagine what she might be able to discern.”

“It’s a thought, but not until we’re absolutely certain that place is safe,” Harry said firmly.

“Young man,” Harry heard a voice call from higher up on the wall. “Up here, young man.”

Harry craned his neck back until he could see who was calling down to him. It was an elderly looking wizard in archaic looking robes.

“Yes, sir?” Harry replied politely.

"My name is Philander Nimbus. I was the Headmaster of Hogwarts from 1534 to 1562. It was I that recognized that which you found in that farm building. Has anyone taken the time to copy down the symbols that were carved into the portals frame?"

"Um, not that I'm aware of, sir, but it would be easy enough to do if they haven't."

"I would strongly suggest that you do so and have a copy sent here. From what little I know of this device they could be very important," the old Headmaster said.

"I'll see to it as soon as I get back, sir, and have it sent here right away," Harry said. "And thank you."

"Not at all. I may just be an old canvas on a wall, but that doesn't mean I've lost my interest in the world."

Professor Dumbledore looked down at Harry with a small smile.

"You see, Harry. Having a bunch of cranky old witches and wizards hanging about the place does have its uses," he said with a chuckle.

This prompted a series of comments from around the office from laughs to harrumphs to outraged sputters. Harry tried hard not to laugh as he didn't want to insult anyone or cut off sources of future aid.

"Harry, I think this would be a good time for you to go see how things are progressing outside," Professor McGonagall said also trying hard to hide a smile.

"Yes, ma'am," he said as he got out of the chair and facing Professor Dumbledore he nodded his head and then left the room.

Once outside he couldn't help but laugh. There was something fundamentally comical about pillars of the magical world squabbling like crabby children. Harry made his way down to the main doors and out into the bright cold morning. He walked around to the walled-in

expanse of grass that served as the practice and training area for Madame Hooch's flying classes. As Harry walked through the arched opening he saw a wonderful sight. Cruising around the field at around six feet off the ground was Abigail, her face one big smile and her airy voice drifting across the field with sounds of delight. Ginny was standing in the middle of the field calling out encouragement and instructions. Harry stood and watched as the small girl made a series of graceful turns followed by some tighter ones. Then she took several short, higher speed runs up and down the lawn. Finally she came to a stop and hovered in front of Ginny who was also grinning broadly.

Perhaps sensing his presence Abigail looked to where Harry was standing. She let out a whoop, or as close to one as her voice would allow, and urged the broom to take her to where he stood waiting. She came to a hover right in front of him.

"Oh, sir. Did you see me? I'm flying and the broom goes everywhere I want it to. It's the most wonderful thing in the world. Thank you, thank you," she spilled out in nearly a constant stream of words.

"You're very welcome, Abigail. I'm glad to see you're enjoying yourself," he said then smiled as Ginny approached them.

"Well, Harry. You were right, as usual," she added with an impish grin. "Once she had a broom that was the right size it all fell into place. She may not be flying seeker for the Ravensclaws but she'll be a very competent flyer on that little speedster."

"I'm sure she will with your expert coaching. What do you say we all head over to the Stadium and see how things are going? Then we can see about some lunch."

"Can I stay on my broom, sir?" Abigail asked excitedly.

"I think so. What do you say, coach?" Harry asked Ginny.

"I think that would be a good idea, but let's be careful she doesn't over do it. Otherwise she'll be sore in places she didn't know she had places."

With that warning Harry and Ginny began walking hand in hand toward the Quidditch stadium with Abigail gliding smoothly along side. She would occasionally make slow wide circles around them but she seemed content to cruise along most of the time. Apparently her quiet, reserved nature precluded the mad antics so common amongst young flyers. They made their way across the lawn in front of the castle and onto the path leading to the stadium. Harry could see that all the applicants had made their way in and so he figured they could enter without causing any distraction.

“Abigail. I think you should land now and walk in with us. I don’t want to distract anyone from what they are doing, ok?” Harry said.

“Yes, sir. I wouldn’t want to do that either,” she said as she drifted to the ground and hopped off the broom.

Harry and Ginny walked on either side of Abigail as they made their way down the main entrance tunnel. As they approached the far end and could see the activity on the pitch they paused to see what was going on. In various areas on the browned grass, stations had been set up in a fashion similar to what Harry and Ginny had experienced with their OWLs and NEWTs . Harry was well aware of the kinds of tests being administered. There were the basics of course, charms, wand work, some DADA and Magical creatures, and for those that choose, more advanced testing that included potions and broom flying. Harry motioned for his two companions to follow him as he walked over to where he saw Maxwell standing observing the goings on.

“Sir,” was all he said by way of greetings.

“Maxwell. So, what do you think?” Harry asked.

“Well, it’s still early yet, but there are a few bright spots out there. That red headed fellow over there has shown some good wand work and knows his defensive charms,” Maxwell said at the same time he glanced toward Ginny and her flowing crimson mane.

“My brother,” she said with a grin.

“Oh, Maxwell, this is my fiancée, Ginny Weasley. That’s her brother, Ron.”

“You have a few friends and acquaintances out there, don’t you, sir?” Maxwell said.

“Yes, that’s why I insisted of staying out of the selection process. I need to make sure we avoid any kind of controversy.”

“Yes, sir. If you don’t mind I’d like to roam around. Check out the prospects.”

“Go right ahead, I’ll talk to you later,” Harry said.

They watched as the older Auror walked off around the perimeter of the nearest station.

“Sir,” Abigail said even more quietly than usual.

“Yes, Abigail, what is it?”

“That man. His voice. He’s one of the one’s I heard that time talking about how sorry you’d be becoming an Auror.”

Abigail was looking up at Harry with her big dark eyes wide with concern. Harry looked at her and then at the retreating back of Maxwell.

“Are you sure, Abigail? This is very important,” Harry said quietly as well.

“Yes, sir. I can recall everything I’ve ever seen that way. He was one of them.”

Harry looked up at Ginny and saw her eyes blazing as she glared in the direction that Maxwell had taken, now lost in the crowd.

“Calm down, Ginny. That was a long time ago.”

“Not really, Harry,” she said, her voice vibrating with anger. “It may seem like it to you but it’s been a pretty short time for people like him when you compare it to how long they’ve been Aurors. You better watch yourself.”

“I always watch myself, love. I think I’ll have a little talk with my new deputy when I get the chance,” he said then looked down at Abigail. “Thank you, Abigail. Once again, you’ve been a big help to me. Looks like I’m going to have to find you a spot when you graduate,” the last was said with a smile.

They stayed and watched for a little while longer and then began the walk back up to the castle and the Great Hall. Abigail needed to be back for lunch and Harry didn’t want to be any kind of distraction to the applicants. When they got to the Great Hall Harry heard a familiar voice.

“Hello, Harry. Hello, Ginny,” came the dreamy voice of Luna Lovegood.

“Luna,” Ginny called running up to her friend and classmate. Harry walked over.

“Hi, Luna, how are you? Are you here for the try outs?” he asked a bit incredulously.

“No, Harry, not that it’s not a brilliant idea of yours. I’m here to talk to Hagrid. I’m working on a plan to search for lost magical creatures,” she said.

“Lost creatures?”

“Yes. There are more than a few magical creatures that were well known to witches and wizards down through the years that are considered extinct by the mainstream community. But every now and again there are sightings reported. I think there are still some out there and I’m going to look for them. My father is going to back the expeditions and I’ll report my findings in his magazine, for starters. Hagrid is helping me figure out what would be the most likely to find

and where to look. We're hoping a few early successes might stir interest at the Ministry."

"Sounds very interesting, Luna," Ginny said. "My older brother Charlie is up here in the highlands somewhere doing some kind of research of his own. It's all very hush hush, but from the various burns on him it probably has something to do with dragons."

"Well, I'll leave those things to him, Ginny. I prefer the smaller, less flammable kinds," she said with her usual dreamy smile.

She gave them a little wave and went out through the front doors leaving Harry and Ginny in the corridor. Abigail had already left to put her broom safely away in her room. Ginny looked up at Harry and said,

"Well, my love, as much as I want to stay and spend the rest of the day with you, tomorrow is a match day. Will you be there? We're at home," Ginny said.

"I'll try, Ginny. I don't think the results from today will be ready for a few days at least so unless something comes up I should be able to get free."

"I hope so. Until tomorrow then," she said as she pulled his head down and gave him a sound kiss and then with a soft caress of his cheek left through the main doors. Harry watched her leave and then sighed.

The rest of the day passed slowly as he maintained a low profile as far as the applicants were concerned. He did have a number of brief conversations with a number of the students and several faculty members. By four o'clock the activity on the Quidditch pitch was winding down and from the direction of the stadium he could see a number of people walking towards the town where they could head for home or get something to eat in Hogsmeade. He watched until the last of the applicants had left and a small knot of witches and wizards made their way up to the castle.

“Mr. Potter,” the Test Director began, “as you can see we have concluded the days business. I believe it went rather well. The Deputy Director stated a certain satisfaction with what he saw and asked me to tell you he was going to head straight back to the Ministry. Processing the results of the tests and developing the list of acceptable candidates will likely take the full week coming up. You may expect the list by Friday afternoon. Is this acceptable?”

“That will be just fine, ma’am,” Harry replied. “I appreciate your assistance in this, all of you. It couldn’t have been done without you.”

“It was our pleasure, Mr. Potter,” the elderly witch replied. “It has been a very interesting and eminently worthwhile experience for all of us. Now if you’ll excuse us, we wish to pay our respects to the Headmistress.”

“Of course,” Harry said.

He stepped aside and watched as the testers walked through the main doors. He figured that they would be some time talking with Professor McGonagall so he decided he would head home and send a note thanking her for all the help that Hogwarts had provided. Within ten minutes he was walking through his front door, Kreacher bowing him in.

As promised he was in the stands for the match and it was a grueling affair. The snitch proved to be in a particularly contrary mood that afternoon and simply refused to be caught. The seekers were kept in nearly constant motion as they battled each other and the nasty little golden orb. The rest of the flyers were pushed to their limits as they battled back and forth over the quaffle and trying to avoid the two bludgers. A number of substitutions had to be made during the course of the match. Harry felt a bit frustrated as there were several times when he was sure one or the other seeker should have been able to make a grab but missed their chances one way or another. Ginny was spending most of the match in the air and it was becoming clear to Harry that she was tiring rapidly.

The score see-sawed back and forth and as the sun was setting the Harpies held a slim twenty point lead when Harry noticed the other

seeker make a fatal mistake, figuratively speaking. The snitch had all but disappeared for the last fifteen minutes when it suddenly swooped past the Harpies' keeper who shouted. Both seekers began diving on the snitch from opposite directions but Harry noticed that, probably due to fatigue, the opposing seeker was coming in too steep and too fast. It was over in the blink of an eye. The Harpies seeker made a desperate lunge and managed to grab the snitch just a few feet above the pitch as the opposing seeker flashed by. The victorious seeker managed a sloppy skidding sliding stop while the other crashed into the ground and bounced to a stop in a heap on the grass. Harry winced but saw that several team mates were already coming to his aid as well as the team trainer.

The Harpies flew a victory lap but it was obvious that they were exhausted. They came in for a landing and gathered around Betty Hapnafl who quickly directed them off the field. The stands were beginning to empty but Harry let them pass since he would be waiting until Ginny was finished in the locker room. He watched as the crashed seeker was tended to. It was obvious that he was conscious now but they did remove him on a stretcher, floating him off to their own sidelines. Once the stands were empty Harry made his way down and into the main tunnel. He waited for perhaps fifteen minutes when he saw the first of the Harpies exit the locker room. He gave them a smile and a nod and one called to him,

"She'll be a few minutes more, Mr. Potter. We're all moving a little slow at the moment."

"Thanks and congratulations. That was a tough match."

They smiled wearily and moved off down that tunnel. A few minutes later Ginny walked slowly through the locker room doorway. When she saw Harry she smiled and tried to hurry towards him. He met her halfway and as they hugged he could feel how tired she was from the way she was leaning into him.

"Ohhh, this feels good, Harry. I'm so tired," she said.

"I can imagine, love. What do you want to do about eating?"

"There's a Chinese take away place on the way home. Why don't we just grab something. I'm afraid I'm not going to be much company tonight," she said with a weary little grin.

"That's ok, we'll eat and then you get some sleep and I'll head for home," he replied quietly.

She looked up at him and smiled.

"You're always so understanding."

He just smiled and shrugged. They walked slowly out of the tunnel and with Harry offering what support he could they made their way home via the restaurant. Ginny was asleep by eight and Harry was home by half past.

Harry arrived at his office on Monday morning feeling satisfied that the tryouts had gone well and he was anxious to see who he would be working with on the new Patrollers squad. It was decided that training would begin the first week of January. But he had another issue to deal with first. He sent a message to Maxwell asking him to come to Harry's office. He arrived about fifteen minutes later.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Maxwell, come on in and close the door," Harry replied.

The older Auror did so and he sat facing Harry across the old desk. Harry looked back with his hands folded on the desk in front of him.

"So what did you think of the tryouts?" Harry asked.

"I was a little dubious at first, but there was some real talent out there. For what you want them to do I think there will be plenty to choose from," Maxwell replied matter-of-factly.

"That brings me to my second question. Just how do you feel about what it is I'm trying to do? I probably should have asked this before I appointed you deputy but I was a little distracted that day."

“Honestly?”

“Of course.”

“I didn’t like it when you first announced it and I still don’t think it’s the best idea in the world. I’ll admit we had problems but nothing that couldn’t be solved without all this.”

“It goes a little deeper then that doesn’t it? It’s my understanding you and others didn’t want me here even as a trainee. Am I right?” Harry asked.

“You know about that, do you?” Maxwell asked, a touch of anxiety in his voice.

“I do.”

After a slight hesitation Maxwell said,

“Most of us saw you as a jumped up amateur riding in here on the coattails of the new Minister and whatever you were able to pull off at Hogwarts,” Maxwell said, and then he shrugged. “You were able to prove you were a tough and capable wizard and in the normal course of events you probably would have turned out to be a solid Auror. But here we are and you’re in charge. So what’s next, my resignation?”

“Not necessarily. If you can put the rest of it aside and concentrate on the task at hand, that’s all I want. I’m not here to be friends or anything else. I have a job to do and I intend to do it. It’s up to you if you want to stay. But remember what I said that first day. I won’t tolerate any attempts to undermine what we’re trying to do.”

“I think I’ll stick around. If this is the way it’s going to be, I want to make sure it’s done right,” Maxwell said with a crooked smile.

“That’s all I want. Let’s get back to work then.”

Maxwell nodded, stood up and left the room. Harry looked at the doorway for a moment longer then shook his head and started to review the outline of the training plan that he had been working on. It

was getting close to noon when Milligan knocked on the doorframe of Harry's office. Harry looked up and said,

"Yes?"

"Got something here I thought you should know about, sir," Milligan said as he stepped into the office. "We finished going through all that stuff in the warehouse and most of it's been taken away by various offices. It'll be a couple of weeks before we have all the details. We started to look around the grounds of that old farm and we're seeing some odd things up there."

"Like what?"

"Strange animal tracks, little trails leading back into some woods, a couple of disguised cave entrances and what might be an underground structure or bunker or somesuch. We haven't done too much poking around at this point. No sign off anything or anyone alive though. Even the tracks look kind of old."

"Hmm, maybe I should come up and take a look. I might be able to tap into that help we got on the warehouse to begin with."

"I thought the same thing, but I know you're not supposed to be on any missions after the last time so..." the lanky wizard trailed off.

"I'll just be taking a look and I can do that from the air. You can have your squad on the ground to get a closer look. Can we use the portal?"

"Yes, sir. It's still functional and nobody's had any trouble with it so far," Milligan answered.

"Ok, let's say I'll meet you all at the entrance to Knockturn Alley at one o'clock. I'll head home and get my broom and a quick bite and then we'll see what's what."

"Yes, sir."

Harry put his paperwork away and headed for the lobby and the quick trip home. As usual Kreacher was waiting for him and as Harry walked in he saw his Firebolt propped against the wall by the hat and coat stand. Kreacher led him into the kitchen where a hot lunch was waiting on the small table. Harry could only smile as he shook his head a bit.

At the appointed hour he was standing at the entrance to the Alley with the assembled members of the MIU. He looked them over and then said,

“Ok, we are just going up there to have a look around. If anything untoward happens just Disapparate out of there and meet back at the Ministry and we’ll figure out what to do from there. I don’t want anyone getting hurt. Let’s go.”

They quickly made their way down to the now closed potions shop. In fact, all five of the shops that shared the common foundation were shuttered up. Very little activity was evident along this end of the Alley. They made their way down into the basement and one by one they went through the portal to emerge in the now vacant warehouse. Harry looked to his right and could see that the hole he had blasted through the wall had been roughly boarded over. Unhindered by the now removed crates and barrels they headed straight for the loading dock doorway and out into the brisk afternoon air. Harry was quickly airborne and as he gained altitude he could get an appreciation for how isolated this area was. For a relatively small country, England still had some pretty big sections of nowhere. He watched as the MIU team fanned out across the property moving away from the warehouse. From his vantage point he could see some of the features that Milligan had been talking about. In the foothills that began to rise up away from the old building he could see an opening that must have been one of the uncovered cave mouths. He could also see some trails through the grass and brush that looked odd from where he was. There were three of them that looked roughly parallel with the one in the middle looking as if it was worn down right to the soil. Near the end was the raised area that Harry figured was the bunker or whatever that Milligan had spoken about. He circled around it lazily as the investigators on the ground made their way up the trails.

They were perhaps fifty yards or so away when the afternoon exploded. A great geyser of soil, rock and gravel rocketed into the sky and then began to rain down on the surrounding area. It was followed by something Harry had hoped he would never see again, an enraged dragon. It happened so fast Harry wasn't sure afterwards but he guessed it was at least a quarter larger than the huge black dragon he had faced during the Triwizard Tournament. Unfortunately, this one wasn't tethered to the ground. As it bellowed its rage it rose into the air.

Harry peeled away in a plunging dive to gain airspeed and then pulled around to see where the thing was. He could see that several small red beams lanced out at the dragon from various places on the ground as those Aurors who were able tried to stupefy the great beast. All they managed was to attract its attention. As it began to focus its attention on the ground Harry had his wand out and he shouted, "CONJUNCTIVITUS".

The beam of magical energy hit the dragon full in the face and the now blinded creature bellowed in pain and rage, letting loose with a blast of fire in Harry's general direction.

Several more Stupefy spells hit the dragon but it didn't seem to matter. Harry took a sweep along the flank of the thrashing monster and after taking a deep breath and visualizing a fire hose at full blast he shouted, "STUPEFY". He felt the energy drain out of him as a massive red beam struck the dragon along its shoulder. The enraged creature dropped half way to the ground before it could recover but whipped its head around and let loose a blast of searing flame where it thought Harry was. It was close, too close. Harry had to try to roll sideways and down but he still felt the agonizing pain of burns race up his left leg and arm and his broom bucked from the impact.

He managed to pull the broom back into a climb to get up and over the floundering reptile. Once more he gathered himself up and aiming the wand as best he could through the pain he unleashed another massive bolt of red energy that struck the beast fully at the base of the great neck. Again it was forced down toward the ground. For

whatever reason it seemed to register on Harry that there was something wrong with this dragon. There was something that didn't look right about it. But he had no time to ponder it. The creature was still airborne, if barely, and the repeated hits by the other Aurors were taking a toll but not fast enough. While barely able to stay aloft Harry once more pulled what reserves he could together and took aim. Just as he released the spell the angry injured dragon whipped its head around towards Harry and the red bolt caught it square in the face. With a last roar that dwindled to a weak wail the creature's wings folded and it dropped the rest of the way to crash to the ground. Harry was also heading down in what could best be described as a controlled fall that took him through some low scrub where he rolled to a stop in a heap. Within moments several Aurors were crashing through the small bare bushes looking for Harry.

"Sir! Sir! Can you hear me, Mr. Potter?" the first to reach him called out.

"Weasley...Charlie Weasley," Harry barely whispered. "Needs...to see...dragon...not right...Charlie needs...to see..." he managed to get out before the blackness overwhelmed him.

Harry's first awareness after the encounter with the dragon was brief and disjointed. Tumbling swirls of black and gray played across his mind's eye without forming any coherent pattern. Then the black rolled back over him.

After a time the black and gray swirled briefly and Harry found himself sitting on a bench looking out over the lake at Hogwarts. He could see the castle and the water but it didn't seem quite right. The edges lacked sharpness and there seemed to be some sort of undulations just beneath the surfaces. He continued to look around until he heard something.

"Hello, Harry," came the soft, low voice of Professor Dumbledore.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said, seeing his mentor standing to his left in a spot where he knew no one was standing a moment before.

"Why are you here, Harry?"

"I don't know, Professor. Is this the same place I came to after that last time with Voldemort?"

"Yes and no, Harry. This is a place between life and death. But it is not the same place as before. You should know that your life hangs by a thread, Harry. Your physical injuries are serious but you've nearly drained yourself, my boy."

"I didn't have any choice, Professor. That dragon was going after the Aurors on the ground."

"I didn't say you were wrong, Harry, but you are in very grave condition."

"I'm tired, Professor, really tired. I think I'll go back to sleep."

"Perhaps that would be best, dear boy. Save your strength. This is not the place for you, not yet."

Dumbledore and Hogwarts faded away and the blackness returned.

After a time the black and gray swirled briefly and Harry found himself looking out over the field he knew was on the other side of the garden wall at the Burrow. He was sitting in the old chaise lounge that he had used every day while he was recuperating that summer after the fall of Voldemort. He could hear the rustling of the garden gnomes in the hedges and then a more familiar sound.

"Hello, Harry," came the voice of Fred Weasley.

"Hello, Fred," Harry replied seeing his friend and 'brother' standing to his left in a spot where he knew no one was standing a moment before.

"Why are you here, Harry?"

"I'm not sure, Fred. Professor Dumbledore told me I needed to rest and this is where I come to do that, right?"

“No, Harry. You go to the Burrow to rest. This place just looks like the Burrow. You came here because you’re dying, Harry.”

“Really? I just feel really tired is all, Fred. I’d like to go someplace where I wouldn’t be tired like this. Besides, is it so bad staying here, Fred?”

“If you stay here it’s because you’re dead, Harry. I guess I don’t mind it too much because we won and how things turned out but there’s lots of things I miss not doing and people I miss not seeing. It’s not time for you yet, Harry.”

“I’m just so tired, Fred. I think I’ll go back to sleep.”

“Good idea, Harry. Go to sleep. If you need to rest, go back to the Burrow. And tell everyone I said ‘hi’,” Fred said with a crooked smile.

Fred and the Burrow faded away and the blackness returned.

After a time the black and gray swirled briefly and Harry found himself standing in the town square of Godric’s Hollow, the hometown of the Potters and Harry’s birthplace. He was looking at the statue that to muggles was a war memorial but to witches or wizards was a monument to the Potters, his mum, dad and himself. He was looking at the stone faces of his parents when he heard a voice.

“Hello, Harry,” came the voice of Sirius Black.

“Hello, Sirius,” Harry replied seeing his godfather standing to his left in a spot where he knew no one was standing a moment before.

“Why are you here, Harry?”

“Well, I’ve seen Dumbledore and Fred Weasley so I thought maybe I could see, well, them,” he said nodding to the statue.

“No, Harry,” Sirius replied. “They will not come here. Not now.”

“Why not, Sirius?” Harry asked.

“Because if they come here, you may decide to stay. It’s not your time yet, Harry. There is too much left for you still to do.”

“Maybe I’m tired of ‘doing’, Sirius. Seems like every time I do something I get more and more beat up. I’m tired, Sirius, really tired. Maybe it’s time to stop.”

“Harry,” Sirius chided him. “You don’t really mean that. You couldn’t be who you are if you really felt that way. I know that you’re tired and hurt but this isn’t the answer, Harry. You have people who love you and need you to go back to them. As I said, Harry, it’s not your time.”

Sirius fell silent and Harry turned his attention back to the statue. After a moment he felt a breeze stirring, coming up the road that led from the edge of town to the square. It was the first he had felt on any of his visits to this place between life and death. He looked down the road and saw a small figure approaching. As it got closer it resolved itself into the figure of a small girl with long dark hair.

“Abigail? What are you doing here?” Harry asked incredulously.

“I’ve come to take you home, sir. They asked me to come and get you.”

“They? Who’s ‘they’?”

“Them,” she replied, pointing up to the statue. “They said they couldn’t do it themselves so they asked me. Please, sir. Come home. We need you to come back. Ginny, the Weasleys, me, everyone really. Please, sir. Come home.”

“She’s right, Harry. Go with her, it’s time to go home,” Sirius said quietly as he faded from view.

Harry looked up into the unseeing stone eyes of his parents and felt the small hand take hold of his and give an insistent tug. He looked down into the large dark eyes that he always felt could look right down into your soul. He let out a sigh and nodded.

“Ok, Abigail. Take me home.”

They began to walk down the road away from the statue and out to the edge of town and when they had walked past the last house, the town and its surroundings faded away and the blackness returned.

The first hint that Harry had that he was awake was the sound of a low groan intruding on his hearing. After a moment he realized he was the one doing the groaning. He put a stop to it and tried to do a bit of self damage assessment. His left leg and arm felt like they were still on fire, if only at a low flame. He was sure there was also some significant bruising because he ached just about everywhere. He also felt empty, not hungry, but empty as if most if not all of his being had been drained away. He dredged up what little strength he had to open his eyes just a bit. Through the barely parted lids he could make out he was in a smallish room with very subdued lighting. Directly across from where he was lying was a high backed chair and he thought he could make out the vague outline of a slightly slumped figure. Time to go for broke he figured.

“Hello,” he was barely able to force out at a low whisper.

He got no reaction.

With an effort that felt to him like he was trying to push over a tree with his bare hands he tried again.

“Hello?” which came out a bit louder.

“What? Omigod, Mr. Potter, is that you?” replied an unfamiliar female voice.

“Yes,” he managed to whisper.

The slumped figure, which had bolted upright at his second hello, jumped up out of the chair and raced out of Harry’s narrow field of vision. He heard a door swing open and a babble of voices. Within moments he heard the door open again and someone approaching his bedside.

“Mr. Potter, my name is Dr. Stonebridge. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Harry replied, his voice barely more than a breath.

“Alright. Please listen and don’t try to respond. Your situation has been extremely critical since they brought you in. You’ve been here over two weeks so far. You have some serious burns on your left leg and arm, which we are treating and you were pretty bruised up from your landing, such as it was. The worse part is you expended an enormous amount of magical energy fighting that dragon, Mr. Potter. You came within a hairs breadth of killing yourself. The fact that you are awake is a good sign but it’s the first one we’ve had so you are far from out of danger. You need to conserve your energy and make no attempts to move or talk. We can be a bit more aggressive with your medicines now but you are in for a very long recovery. If you understand what I’ve said please acknowledge by closing and then opening your eyes, slowly.”

Harry managed to do so although it felt like moving bricks instead of eyelids.

“Very good. We’ve had someone observing you around the clock, Mr. Potter. That will continue for the time being. Get some rest, Mr. Potter and I’ll tell you more when you’re stronger.”

Harry faded in and out of consciousness any number of times over an undetermined period of time, at least as far as Harry was concerned. He was aware that periodically he would be given potions to drink and then broths to eat. He had lost his glasses in the crash so he could only make out vague shapes of people and their voices were always kept low so he couldn’t really tell who was in the room with him. He finally got to a point where he was able to stay awake for at least a little while and be aware of what was going on around him. During one of these periods Dr. Stonebridge came to see him.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. I’d like to talk to you for a bit. At least I’ll talk and I’d like you to just listen but still no talking if you would. First, you are making progress but its slow going. The burns on your arm and leg are healing but I’m afraid there will be some scarring. With your weakened condition we could only do so much magic healing. In

addition, when you crashed there was some extensive bruising. They are also healing but again, at a slow pace. I understand that you were raised in a muggle household.”

Harry nodded once.

“I’m muggle born, myself. But the reason I ask is that I want to use an analogy that you’ll understand to explain your condition. You were much like a car running out of petrol, Mr. Potter. In essence, you were running on fumes. We are trying to fill that tank back up but it will be slow going. I’m afraid you’ll be our guest for the holidays.”

Harry nodded once to show his understanding.

“Now I’ll try to answer some basic questions for you. It’s been two weeks since we last spoke. We’ve kept you under sedation, those potions, for that time to allow your body to restore itself. Sleep and nourishment are the only cures for your condition. As to your family, you’ll be allowed visitors in another week or so. You should know that they have been here though. While you were unconscious and then sleeping, they were helping with the round the clock observation and someone has been in the outer room the whole time as well. The one thing you won’t have to worry about is support, Mr. Potter,” the healer said with a smile. “Well, I think that’s enough for now.”

Doctor Stonebridge made a note to Harry’s charts and with a last smile and nod, which Harry had trouble seeing without his glasses, he left the room. Harry lay there, vaguely aware of the nurse that sat in the high backed chair across from the foot of his bed. He closed his eyes and tried to form some coherent thoughts about what had happened. He knew that the encounter with the dragon bordered on the fantastic. The creature was unlike the four dragons that he had seen during the Triwizard Tournament and it didn’t seem to match any description he had seen or heard during his advanced Creatures class with Hagrid. It all made him feel very uneasy but he couldn’t say why. Somewhere along this line of thought he drifted off to sleep.

Dr. Stonebridge was true to his word one week after their second conversation, right after Harry had finished a breakfast of a more

robust broth. As the nurse cleared away his tray the healer stepped inside the room, keeping the door open.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. Are you ready for your first visitor?”

Harry nodded. The healer looked back out into the outer room and said,

“You can come in now if you’d like,” he said.

Mrs. Weasley walked in past the doctor with a murmured ‘thank you’. The nurse carried Harry’s tray out as Mrs. Weasley took a seat in the chair near Harry’s bedside. She looked at her ‘adopted’ son and smiled. Harry looked back and whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Harry, dear. We aren’t going to go down that road again are we? From what we’ve been told if you hadn’t been there those Aurors on the ground wouldn’t have had a chance. Several of them have been by and they said your Stupefying charms were like battering rams. So don’t be sorry for saving peoples lives. Now, as your mother, I have to ask this. How are you feeling, dear?”

“Tired,” Harry whispered.

“Well that’s understandable, Harry. I can’t imagine the amount of magical energy it took to kill a dragon that big.”

“Dead?”

“I’m afraid so, dear. The Auror Milligan has been by a few times. He told us what had happened. They all came to help you first and by the time they got around to checking on the dragon it was dead.”

“Charlie?”

“Yes, they called him in and he’s been working on it ever since. He can’t tell us much but what he has been able to say is that it’s all very strange and hints at something much darker.”

Harry nodded then took a deep breath or at least deeper than he had been.

“Ginny?”

“As you can imagine, dear, it’s been particularly hard on her. She’s been here nearly every day, one way or the other. The Harpies have been very understanding. She’ll be here to visit you this afternoon,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“You?”

“Oh, my dear. It hasn’t been easy, I won’t lie to you, but now that we see that you’re improving, it will be better. You concern yourself with getting well. We’ll all be just fine.”

Harry reached out with his right hand slowly, agonizingly slowly. Mrs. Weasley reached out with both hands to take his. She felt a brief squeeze that she returned gently.

“Love you, Mum” he whispered.

“Oh, Harry,” was all she could manage, her voice cracking around the tears.

They sat for a few moments longer and then the door opened a bit and a female voice called in,

“Mrs. Weasley?”

“Ah, well, Harry, dear. It’s time for me to go. Ginny will be here this afternoon so you better get some sleep and save up your strength,” she said with a teary smile.

She leaned forward and kissed Harry on his forehead. Then she stood up and brushing his unruly hair aside she turned and left the room. Harry closed his eyes and considered what had just passed. His ‘adoptive’ mother sounded worn and tired. It was obvious that this had all been very difficult for her and he shuddered, in his mind at

least, at the thought of what shape Ginny must be in. He didn't have long to think on it though as just the short visit of Mrs. Weasley had exhausted him. He was soon fast asleep.

Sometime later something tugged at his awareness. A gentle fragrance tickled his nose and nudged him to awaken. He tilted his head to the side and found himself looking at what he thought was the most beautiful face ever.

"Hello, sweetheart," Ginny said quietly.

"Hello, love," he whispered back.

"Oh, Harry, what are we going to do with you?" Ginny said.

Harry held up his hand which she took gently in hers. He still got the same tingle that he always felt when they held hands and he smiled at her.

"How...are...you?"

"A lot better now that I can talk to you. It was bad at first. Very bad. It was a week before they could even say that they thought you would live. We've all been taking turns watching over you. Poor Fleur had to be given a sedative when she got here. She nearly went into hysterics when she first saw you. Mom has been a rock as usual but you probably noticed how tired she is."

Harry nodded.

"She's been here nearly the whole time. They gave her a room down the hall to sleep in but we finally convinced her to go home and get some decent sleep. I hope you don't mind but I've been staying at the Black house. Kreacher and I keep each other company. He's been spending a lot of time here too you know. Usually when one of the family is watching you."

Harry's raised eyebrows showed his surprise.

“Oh, yes, my love. He would curl up in a blanket on the floor next to your bed. If you stirred he’d pop up to watch you and then go back to sleep. I know house elves are supposed to be devoted to their master or I guess now, employer, but that one takes it to whole new levels. A lot of people feel much the same, Harry. You wouldn’t believe the number of flowers, letters, and people who just come by to ask how you’re doing. Not a week has gone by that the Prophet does run some sort of article about you. The Ministry hasn’t released the details but they had to say something after the uproar here at the hospital after you arrived. Officially you’ve been severely injured in the line of duty.”

Harry rolled his eyes a little bit.

“We’re all still amazed by it all, Harry. You actually killed a dragon with magic. That’s unbelievable. But please don’t ever do it again. I really don’t care about the dragons but it’s much too hard on you and it’s not doing me much good either,” she said with a small smile, kissing his hand as well.

“No more.”

“No more what, Harry?”

“Field work...ever.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Harry,” she said with a chuckle. “I’m sure those other Aurors are bloody glad you went along that time. But I understand what you mean. I hope you’re right.”

“Quidditch?” Harry asked

“Don’t worry about that, sweetheart. This is the slow part of the season. I’ve only missed three matches so far. Besides, all the girls are pretty worried about you too. They’re all pretty taken with you, you know,” she said with an impish smile and wink.

Harry just gave a little head shake and smiled.

“Oh, I almost forgot. These are for you, Harry.”

Ginny reached into her robe and pulled out a new pair of glasses. She used the hem of her robe to clean the lenses and very carefully put them on Harry. His smile got bigger now that he could see Ginny more clearly. It was a double edged sword since it also meant he could see how tired she was. Just then the door opened and the same voice as this morning called in,

“Miss Weasley?”

“Oh, hell, I just got here,” she said with exasperation.

Harry smiled a little and said,

“Go home...sleep.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me, Harry?”

“No...you need...to sleep. Get sick,” he said haltingly.

“Worried about me, huh? Just like you,” she said fondly. “Ok, sweetheart. I’ll take Mum home and we’ll see you tomorrow. I’m probably not supposed to do this but, what the heck.”

She leaned down over Harry and kissed him briefly on the lips and then put her arms around him as best she could. Harry was able to put both his arm around her but couldn’t give much of a hug. She still sighed deeply and let her head rest on his chest for a moment. When she stood up she smiled down at him, her eyes bright with tears.

“Good night, my hero. Until tomorrow.”

She let her hand run down the side of his face and then she turned and walked towards the door. Just before she went out the door she turned and blew him a kiss.

Harry did indeed spend the holidays in the hospital. His strength was returning slowly but in was the middle of January before he was able to get out of bed. His visitors were still tightly regulated but by then he

was able to have more than one at time. The routine settled in with Mrs. Weasley coming in the morning, usually with someone to accompany her and Ginny coming in the afternoon. However there were days when she didn't visit since Harry had been able to persuade her to go back to playing. When Ginny had a match Fleur would take her place. The first time or two was difficult because the volatile girl was in a near state of hysteria. Bill was finally able to get her to calm down by pointing out that it was counterproductive to Harry's recovery for him to see her so wound up.

It wasn't until mid February that a discussion about taking him home was begun. There were two alternatives to consider. It was either the Burrow or the Black house. Mrs. Weasley was adamant that Harry needed to be at the Burrow where he could be watched over by the Weasley clan. Harry felt he had been enough of a burden on his adopted family and was pushing to go to what he felt was his home now. Ginny said she was more the willing to move in, using a guest room of course, and could easily keep an eye on him in between matches. Kreacher would be there and of course Mrs. Weasley as well as the others were free to visit. It took about a week but Harry finally won out, convincing his 'parents' that he was old enough to make his own decisions and it's not like they weren't just a blink of the eye away.

So it was that on Tuesday of the last week of February, under cover of darkness, a Ministry sedan glided up to the spot where Number 12 Grimmauld Place should be, unseen by muggles. Harry walked slowly but steadily, using a cane, up the staircase with Ginny on one side and Mrs. Weasley on the other. As they reached the top the large wooden door opened and Kreacher bowed them in saying,

"Welcome home, Master Harry."

Harry's Future, Part 11

"Well, sir, your recent, how shall we say, indisposition has been inconvenient but we've been able to work around it," Maxwell said.

He was sitting across from Harry in his study in the Black house. Harry had decided that he could use a few hours each day getting back up to speed with what was going on in the Ministry. Maxwell was there to brief Harry on how the first group of Patrollers was doing.

"We pushed off the start of training to the beginning of February and it's been mostly physical training, some charms and wand work. We start foot patrols in two weeks. Two recruits teamed with an Auror."

"Who do you have in line as the trainers for that," Harry asked.

He was finally able to hold a conversation but his voice was still on the quiet side. His physical strength was returning but he wasn't about to try anything magical for a while if he could avoid it. Kreacher and Ginny were both adamant on that point anyway so it wasn't likely to come up anytime soon.

"Here's the rotation schedule, sir."

Harry looked over the list of names and nodded.

"I'd like to be able to talk to them before they start. Let's schedule something for next week. We can do it here. I think we can fit them in the dining room with a little rearranging."

"We can do that. Oh, Milligan will be here this afternoon with a report on what they've found in and around that bunker. It's pretty strange stuff and these days that's saying something. But I'll let him go over it with you. That's all I have for you today, sir. Anything you need from us?" Maxwell asked.

"Just pass on my apologies to the recruits and tell them I'll be in to see them as soon as I can."

"Yes, sir."

Maxwell stood up and with a nod turned around to leave the room. As he went through the door into the corridor Harry heard him say,

“Ma’am.”

“Mr. Maxwell,” came Ginny’s rather cool reply.

Harry winced a bit. He was well aware of how Ginny felt about Maxwell after the revelation that he was one of the Aurors that Abigail had ‘overheard’ commenting about how sorry Harry would be that he didn’t take up teaching or Quidditch for a living. Her dislike for the man manifested itself in cold correctness whenever their paths crossed.

When she came into the room the tightness around her eyes and the set of her lips broadcast her displeasure.

“Hello, love,” Harry said warmly, trying to dispel her chilly attitude.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” she replied, her answering grin warming her expression considerably.

She walked over to Harry and bent down to give him a kiss. From the way she was dressed it was obvious to Harry that she had just arrived from Holyhead. She had been gone three days for matches.

“How are you feeling, Harry? These meetings aren’t taxing you are they?” she asked.

“No, dear. I’m fine. In fact, its better this way. I don’t feel so bloody useless. In fact, Milligan is coming this afternoon to give me a rundown on what they’ve figured out about all this. Should prove interesting since we haven’t been able to pry anything out of Charlie.”

“Yeah, he’s being such a brat. You’d think he’d be able to trust his own family,” she said rolling her eyes.

Harry just smiled and then a thought occurred to him. Actually it had reoccurred to him several times in the past but he always got distracted by something else.

“Ginny, I was wondering if you have heard anything about Abigail lately. I would have thought with everything that happened she would have tried to get in touch with me. Is she ok?”

Ginny looked a little uncomfortable but she looked at Harry and took a deep breath.

“I guess it’s time you were told. We figure that right about the time you crashed after your fight with the dragon, she was sitting in a classroom. Apparently she screamed like she was in great pain and then collapsed. The whole time you were in a coma those first two weeks, she was laying unconscious in a bed in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. It wasn’t the same as with you though, Harry. While you didn’t move or say anything, she was heard to mumble and move around. When you woke up she started to come around and after a week or so she was able to get out of bed. She’s been back to classes now but she’s been very withdrawn. I’ve been to see her a few times but she just wants to sit there and hold my hand and not talk at all.”

Harry sat for a few moments looking at nothing in particular. The he looked up at Ginny who was looking at him with questions plain on her face. He let out a sigh and said,

“Ginny, do you remember that time in your brothers’ shop in Hogsmeade, after I went into that black mood?”

“Of course I do, Harry. It’s not something someone would likely forget.”

“Do you remember what you said about sharing all the bad times as well as the good times?”

“I do and I meant it, sweetheart. What are you driving at?”

“Well, this is one of those times that I’m going to share something dark with you that I don’t want you to ever mention to anyone else, ok?”

Ginny looked at his somber expression and the pain in his bright green eyes.

“You know that what we share is just between us, Harry. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Harry then proceeded to describe everything that he had experienced while he was in the coma; the encounters with Dumbledore, Fred and Sirius. Ginny’s hands were clasped tightly in her lap and her expression was every bit as somber as his.

“It was like I was looking for a reason not to come back. I think that may be why I wound up in Godric’s Hollow. Maybe I was hoping that if my parents came like the others, I’d stay and we’d be together again.”

“What about us, Harry? Wouldn’t you want to come back for me, if nothing else?” Ginny asked, clearly distressed.

“Sitting here with you now, the answer would be most certainly yes, Ginny. But who knows what’s going on in here, deep down,” he said tapping his forehead. “I’ve been bounced around, cursed, on death’s door twice. Maybe there was just a part of me that wants it to end. I don’t know. The part of me that’s awake and talking to you right now sure doesn’t but...” he trailed off with shrug.

After a pause he began to describe what happened with Abigail and that she was summoned somehow by his parents and how she pleaded with him to come back.

“If she can remember any of that, I suspect that’s why she’s not talking much. There must be some very difficult things for her to deal with. I wish I could get up there and talk to her. I’ll send her a message by owl today though. Maybe she’ll write back to me about what’s bothering her. I owe her that much.”

“That would be a good idea, Harry.”

Harry let out a long sigh.

“You know, Ginny, I’m starting to think this whole business might not have been such a good idea.”

“What are you talking about, Harry?” she asked.

“Me being an Auror and then the Chief. It seems like I’m just messing things up. Maybe it would have been better that I stayed at Hogwarts and taught,” he said, his quiet voice sounding depressed.

“That’s a load of nonsense, Harry. If you had stayed at Hogwarts nothing would have been done about those smugglers until it might have been too late, again. And who would have had a better idea for reorganizing the Auror department. Do you have any idea how excited people are about what you’re doing? George and Angelina have been telling us how all the shop owners can’t wait to see the Patrollers at work. Not to mention how glad those other Aurors were that you were there to fight that dragon.”

She reached over and grabbed Harry’s hand.

“I know that that night in the shop up at Hogsmeade I said you had the right to feel melancholy now and again, but only for the right reasons, Harry. This isn’t one of those reasons. You’re doing good work and it’s unfortunate that some things have gone badly, like that Death Eater and now this but those aren’t reasons to doubt what you’re doing. Sirius was right, Harry. You have things to do and there’s no one better able to do them than you, my hero,” the last was said with a big smile and a tightening of her grip on his hand.

Harry looked across at the face that never failed to make him feel better, no matter what was happening. He tugged on her arm and pulled her over to sit on his lap. With both arms wrapped around her and his head resting on hers he sighed.

“Maybe if we stay like this for an hour or three, it will help,” Harry said.

“Well, if you think it will only be a short time,” she replied with a laugh.

Harry hugged her tighter and they began to talk about their favorite topic, their wedding plans. They remained that way until they heard the knocker banging on the front door. Kreacher was there in an instant and then he was standing in the open doorway. Ginny had already slid off Harry’s lap but Kreacher smiled a knowing little smile. Then he said,

“Mr. Milligan of the Aurors office wishes to speak with Master Harry.”

“Thanks, Kreacher, please have him come in,” Harry replied.

“Yes, Master Harry.”

A moment later the lanky wizard appeared in the doorway.

“Afternoon, sir. I have some information you might find interesting.”

“Please come in and sit down. Oh, Milligan this is my fiancée, Ginny Weasley. Ginny this is Milligan, head of the Magical Investigation Unit.”

Milligan nodded toward Ginny and tilted his head to one side.

“Weasley? Your dad is Arthur Weasley?” he asked.

“Yes, he is.”

Milligan nodded.

“He’s been helping us out with the loan of investigators on this assignment. I guess Charlie’s your brother. He certainly knows his dragons.”

“Yes, he does. If you two will excuse me I have some unpacking and laundry to do,” she said and then turned to Harry. “Not to long, Harry. You’re still recuperating, you know.”

“Yes, love. We’ll try to keep it to a low roar,” he said with a smile.

She bent down to kiss him on the forehead and then with a last nod to Milligan she left the room.

Harry watched her leave and then turned to Milligan.

“So, what have you got for me?”

“Well, sir. If we thought that whole smuggling thing was strange, it was nothing compared to this. I don’t know if you had time to notice but that was no ordinary dragon, if there is such a thing. At least that’s what Charlie Weasley says and I guess he’s the expert.”

“I’d have to say he is. And yes, I did notice something was strange about it, but since I was a bit busy I didn’t look too closely. What did Charlie have to say about it?” Harry asked.

“The report is considered classified, sir, but you’re cleared to know. It appears that someone had been tampering with that dragon. Charlie Weasley believes it was basically a Hungarian Horntail, but someone was able to change it. At the moment we don’t know if it was done with magic or some sort of muggle methods. One of Arthur Weasley’s investigators knows a lot about muggles and he mentioned something called genetic engineering. Anyway it looked like that underground building was where it was kept and there were a couple of tunnels leading back towards those caves that we uncovered the entrances to. It looks like there was some kind of laboratory set up in there. We think there may be a connection to those smugglers. Charlie Weasley thinks that whoever was tinkering with that dragon was part of the smuggling or provided the smugglers with access to that old barn.”

“Did you find any records? Books, papers, that sort of thing?” Harry asked.

“No, sir. But there were plenty of places to keep them. Shelves, some file cabinets but all empty. A lot of dust around the place leads us to believe the laboratory was abandoned a while ago. Why the dragon was still there, that’s another mystery. There was nothing that looked

like supplies for it and we haven't heard any reports of missing livestock or people for that matter in that area."

"What happened to the carcass?"

"Charlie Weasley took some samples but the rest of it was taken away by the Department for Regulation of Magical Creatures. Don't know how or where. Showed up with a signed order from Minister Shackbolt and told us to leave while they dealt with it. When we came back there wasn't a sign of it anywhere, just the wrecked bunker."

"Probably tucked away in the Mysteries Department in a lot of little jars by now," Harry replied.

"Probably. Well, that's about all we have for now. I have a feeling that there's more information out there but we don't have access to it yet. Maybe you can pry something loose from your soon to be brother-in-law. This seems to be more than just a big time smuggling operation," Milligan concluded.

"Ok, I'll see what I can find out. Thanks for coming out, Milligan."

"Not a problem, sir. I figure we owe you more than a few house calls," the lanky wizard replied with a wry grin.

Harry just smiled as the Auror turned and walked out of the room. Now that he was alone Harry leaned his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. His thoughts raced and tumbled as he tried to piece together the events of that day. He tried to form a picture in his mind of the dragon so that he might discern what made it seem so odd. Unfortunately everything had happened so fast that he had no clear image to recall. At some point in his musings he drifted off to sleep.

He was awaked by a soft voice calling his name from very close by. When his eyes opened he had to focus on the face of Ginny only inches from his. He smiled.

"Hello, sweetheart. It's almost time for dinner. You've been asleep for about three hours. Are you sure you're ready for these meetings?" she asked.

"I'm ok, Ginny, as long as I can get a nap in here or there. It's odd though. This time it seems to be taking longer to get over then after Voldemort, you know."

"Well, Harry. You were in a lot worse shape this time. That first time you woke up after what, a little more then a day. This time you were in a coma for two weeks and barely conscious for two more. From what you've described about those dreams you were very much at death's door. The doctors have said it might be well into spring before you are fully recovered. Just be patient, my love. You have plenty of people to help you get things done."

"Hmmm, I know but some things I'm supposed to be doing myself, like helping Hermione make contact with the Centaurs, Goblins and house elves. I'm sure that's way behind schedule now," Harry said.

"I've talked to Hermione a few times in the past few weeks, Harry. She's already had one conversation with a few of the Goblins that Kandak had pulled together and Hagrid sent word that the Centaurs are ready to talk but only when you are able to be there. At this point they believe you are the only human they can trust. From what Hagrid has been able to find out it seems that a few were watching Voldemort's camp and saw you walk in to...well, you know. Apparently your selflessness has impressed them a great deal. So, progress is being made and you'll be able to do some good things once you let yourself get well. So, up you come, my hero. Kreacher has dinner waiting for you," she finished with a smile as she took his hands and helped him out of the chair.

It was several days later when he finally had a chance to question Charlie about what he had discovered about the dragon. At Harry's invitation all the Weasleys were at the Black house for dinner. He missed seeing them and he thought it would be a good way to let them know he was doing better and thank them for being there for him, again.

Kreacher had gone all out and Harry wasn't sure but he thought the little house elf had taken some lessons from Mrs. Weasley. After they had finished the meal and Mrs. Weasley had lost the argument with Kreacher about helping clean up the after dinner mess and gone into the sitting room, Harry managed to pull Charlie aside for a quiet conversation.

"Harry, I know you want to know what's going on and frankly nobody deserves to know better than you do but I'm not really at liberty to tell anyone anything yet," Charlie said, obviously uncomfortable with trying to fend off his questions.

"Charlie, I'm supposed to be dealing with all the law enforcement issues within the Ministry. Hell, I started this investigation. So yes, I do deserve to know what's going on. In fact, I'm going to insist on it," Harry said, his voice quietly emphatic.

Charlie looked at Harry, feeling the intensity of those green eyes boring into him. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he nodded.

"Alright, Harry. I'm going out on a very thin limb here but I guess you do need to know. As best I've been able to figure out that beast you tangled with started out as a Hungarian Horntail. But someone has tampered with it. It appears to have been manipulated to try and include some of the characteristics of a Basilisk."

Harry started at the sound of the creature that nearly killed him in the Chamber of Secrets all those years ago.

"Yes, Harry, I know. And I think you know what that means," Charlie said, lowering his voice.

"Voldemort?"

"Could be. It's only been about three years now that he's gone and he was at his peak there at the end. Who knows everything he had a hand in? Maybe this was just a relic of his schemes, maybe not, but we'll have to keep our eyes open."

Harry scowled a bit and said,

"I wonder how long it will be until we don't have to worry about tripping over any more of his landmines."

"Landmines?" Charlie asked.

"Sorry, it's a muggle thing. I meant stumbling across any more of his nasty surprises."

Charlie just nodded.

The next two weeks passed fairly quickly and without any significant incidents. The trainers assigned to patrol duty arrived at Harry's house on the Tuesday following the family dinner. It was a tight fit but they were all seated on the various couches and chairs that Harry and Kreacher could maneuver into the parlor.

"Thanks for coming out everyone. I was hoping to take a more active role in the recruit training but it seems that I haven't outgrown my school boy tendency to stumble into disasters," he said with a small grin.

The Aurors responded with a few smiles and one or two nervous chuckles. A middle aged witch coughed meaningfully and Harry focused on her.

"I don't mean to interrupt you, sir, but if makes you feel any better, there isn't a single witch or wizard who was there with you that day that doesn't count themselves lucky to be alive. Nothing they were doing was having any effect. We'll be glad when you're back but nobody begrudges you the recovery time."

Harry was surprised to see that the woman, nearly twice his age was actually looking embarrassed.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. Well, to the matter at hand. I realize that this is a different sort of thing that we are attempting here. It's my understanding that Aurors haven't had to have much contact with the general public in the past. You've been selected for this assignment

based on your experience as well as...well, personality traits that should make interacting with the trainees and public a more positive occurrence.” The last was said with a smirk.

The Aurors responded with more sincere humor. It would have surprised Harry to know that more than one of those seated before him were sharing the same absurd image of the late Mad Eyed Moody stomping up and down Diagon Alley with his roving eye spinning in all directions. Harry began discussing his vision of how the Patrollers were to conduct their assignment. He insisted that they get to know each and every shopkeeper by name and that at the start of any shift that they step inside each shop to say hello and determine if there is anything the shopkeeper needed to talk about. He made sure that the Aurors understood his view that the Patrollers were not just there as law enforcers but as the face of the Ministry to the public at large. He reiterated his assessment that the Ministry in general and the Aurors specifically had let down the wizarding public and while recent events may have helped they were a far cry from having rehabilitated that image.

The session had ended shortly before lunch and Harry informed them that he had arranged for them all to have lunch at the Cauldron, his treat. This was met with a murmur of general approval. As he stood up he smiled and said,

“I wanted to thank you for your efforts and besides, it’s an excuse for me to get out of this bloody house.”

They all laughed at this. They followed Harry from the room and out onto the stoop. Two large ministry sedans were parked at the curb and quickly they all piled in. Harry slowly made his way to the seat next to the driver. In a matter of moments they were pulling up outside the Leaky Cauldron. Due to his still healing leg injury Harry was the last to exit the car but none of the others had made to enter the Cauldron. As Harry approached the door, aided by his cane, it swung open and he was greeted by the new landlord or in this case, landlady, Hannah Abbott.

“Harry! It’s so good to see you up and about. Please come in, all of you.”

Hannah took hold of Harry's free arm and escorted him into the common room where a small number of patrons looked on. One or two familiar faces smiled as he approached but there were several that looked stunned and one elderly witch actually looked frightened. Harry stiffened as he saw this and Hannah felt the change. She tightened her grip on his arm and whispered to him.

"Don't let it bother you, Harry. There's been some pretty wild talk lately. One of the advantages of running this place is you hear all the gossip. I'll fill you in after you've had lunch and the others have left."

Harry gave her a small smile and tried to relax. Hannah led them to a secluded area of the dining room where several tables had been arranged. When everyone had been seated and glasses filled with various beverages, Harry tapped on his with a fork for attention. He took his glass and raised it and said,

"To success in the future."

The others responded with 'hear, hears' and a few 'cheers' and they settled into a rather excellent lunch. Hannah stopped by several times to make sure everything was to the diners liking. It didn't escape Harry's notice that Hannah appeared to be paying special attention to what was being said and who was saying it as she circulated amongst the various tables. After an hour or so had passed the lunch was concluded and the Aurors left but not before thanking Harry for the meal and assuring him that his plans were in good hands and that the first street training session would commence promptly the following Monday morning. After everyone had left, Hannah came over and joined Harry at the now nearly deserted table. Harry looked at his former classmate and friend waiting for her to begin.

"First of all, Harry, I don't know if I ever remembered to thank you for your suggestion about approaching Gringotts for the loan to buy the Cauldron. I just love running the place."

"You're welcome, Hannah. I'm really glad it's working out for you," Harry replied.

Her expression turned more serious and she lowered her voice.

“As to what happened when you came in. Ever since the incident with the dragon, you’ve been the subject of a lot of talk. At first it was more about whether you were going to survive or not but once the news got out that you were expected to recover the discussions got a lot more varied. It didn’t help that the Ministry tried to clamp down on the details. But once the basics were out, the rumor mill started to run at full speed. Quite frankly some of it was absolutely ridiculous but apparently some folks are starting to think you’re someone to fear.” As she said this she laid her hand on his forearm.

“To fear? What? They think I’m going over to the Dark Arts or something?” Harry said with some heat.

“No, Harry, I don’t think that anyone thinks that, at least not that they’d discuss in public but with all the things you’ve done while at school, then defeating Voldemort and now basically killing a huge dragon single-handedly, they don’t know what to think and that makes them afraid. Those of us who know you so well know there isn’t anything to fear but we are relatively few.” She smiled and patted Harry on the arm. “Don’t fret about it, Harry. Just keep doing what you’re doing and in time they’ll see that you have our best interests at heart and there is nothing for them to fear.”

She leaned in and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek and smiled at him.

“By the way, how is Ginny? I haven’t seen her in quite a while.”

“She’s got a busy schedule with Quidditch and she spends all her free time keeping an eye on me. Once I’m more mobile we’ll come in for dinner and a visit. How’s Neville coming along at Hogwarts? I haven’t been up since just before...” he ended with a shrug.

“He’s doing great, Harry. His research keeps him busy and he really enjoys it. He’s still a little bit nervous when he has to do lectures for Professor Sprout but he’s getting more comfortable about it. Your advice has been very helpful.”

“Well, I’m glad I can be of help. Guess I’d better see about getting home. I appreciate your help with the lunch. I’ll make sure Ginny and I get in to see you and Neville as soon as we can.”

“You two are welcome anytime, you know that,” Hannah said as she stood and offered Harry a hand. She escorted him to the door and with a last peck on the cheek he walked out onto the sidewalk. He wasn’t expecting it but he was happy to see that a sedan was still waiting for him. The driver got out and opened the rear door for him.

“We took the others back to the Ministry but they had me come back for you.”

“I’m glad you’re here. Normally it’s not a bad walk but with this,” Harry said wagging the cane meaningfully.

“Yes, sir.”

The ride home was short and uneventful. Harry’s next outing would be more dramatic. As promised the training patrols began promptly at sunrise on the following Monday morning. The early start allowed the trainers and trainees to be visible right from the start and to get a good look around before the street began to fill. By the end of the first shift Harry was receiving word that the response in Diagon Alley was extremely positive with numerous enthusiastic greetings and in the case of the double patrols in Knockturn Alley, grudging respect. By Friday Harry was feeling fit enough and curious enough to venture to Diagon Alley to see for himself. He was dropped off by a Ministry sedan at the Cauldron and he made his way through to the entrance of the Alley. He wasn’t walking as well as he had before the injury but he was much improved. He still used the cane but it was now more to delay the onset of fatigue as opposed to keep him from falling on his face. As he stepped out onto the pavements of the Alley he could see that for a weekday it was fairly busy. He took this as a sign that conditions were improving.

He kept his pace measured and let his eyes sweep along both sides of the Alley, noting the well kept condition of the storefronts, pavements and cobbles. He received a number of cheerful greetings but he also noted more than a few looks of concern. He shrugged

inwardly and continued on. He had just passed the store selling magical supplies when he heard an all too familiar voice behind him.

“Well, well, Mr. Harry Potter, up and about.”

Harry turned slowly and saw standing just outside the doorway Lucius Malfoy. Following his own instructions to the Patroller trainers he remained polite.

“Mr. Malfoy,” he said with a slight nod.

“So, Potter. It would appear you’re paying the price for your adventures, or should I say, misadventures,” Malfoy replied with a sneer.

Harry looked at his former nemesis and noticed the gaunt face, the richly decorated but threadbare robes and the general hard worn look of the man and smiled slightly.

“I’d say the same could be said for you as well, Mr. Malfoy.”

Harry watched the sneer drop of the older man’s face to be replaced by a look of pure hatred as well as a twitch under his left eye. He also took note of the right hand moving furtively to the inside of his robe.

“I really wouldn’t recommend reaching for your wand, Mr. Malfoy. At this range I don’t really need to use one and if you haven’t noticed there are three Aurors standing no more then a dozen paces to your left with wands already drawn. Not to mention all the other witches and wizards that are gathered about us at the moment.”

Harry had sensed more then seen that a number of passersby had stopped and were watching what was unfolding between him and Malfoy. Malfoy glanced to his left and saw the two trainees and the Auror trainer staring at him with faces set in stone. Coincidentally, or not, one of the trainees was Ron Weasley. His eyes were boring into the older man and his wand, while pointed safely downward, was vibrating as Ron struggled to control himself. Harry gave a bit of a wry chuckle as he fixed his green eyes on the older taller wizard.

"It's a funny thing when you think about it," he said quietly

"And what would that be, Potter?" he asked, the bitterness in his voice undisguised.

"Despite all our differences, you and I have one very significant thing in common. We both stand here as a result of a mother's love for her son. I'm sure you realize, Mr. Malfoy, that the only thing that kept you from meeting the same fate as all the other Death Eaters was Mrs. Malfoy's intervention on my behalf that day in the Dark Forest. That tattoo you wear was a death sentence for all the others."

Malfoy sneered again as he raised his left arm and pulled back the sleeve to reveal a large burn scar where the death's head tattoo had been.

"Bit of a nasty household accident," he said calmly.

Harry simply nodded and said,

"Speaking of your son, how is Draco doing these days?"

The elder Malfoy laughed dismissively and said,

"He's on his own now. He couldn't find a decent wizard's job so he had to seek employment disguised as a muggle. He's working for some company in Surrey that makes some sort of muggle tools, drills or whatever they are called."

Inwardly, Harry started at this revelation. Perhaps there was some justice in the world.

"I'm sure you're overjoyed to hear of the continued disgrace you've helped visit on us," he said the last with his voice dripping with scorn.

"Let's not kid ourselves, Mr. Malfoy. We all made our choices and now we get to deal with the consequences. And just so you know, we haven't forgotten about you. Your activities are of great interest to us and you're being watched very closely. You're alive, Mr. Malfoy, that's more than any of the others can say. Perhaps you should consider

yourself fortunate and try to make the best of it,” Harry said with a straight face. “Good day to you, Mr. Malfoy.”

With that, Harry turned and continued his slow walk past more of the shops. He stopped in at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and talked briefly with George in his office.

“Your leg seems to be doing a lot better, Harry,” George was saying.

“Yeah, not much pain or stiffness anymore. It just gets tired pretty quickly. I need to get more exercise and I should be back to normal quick enough. So how have you been getting along with Ron gone?”

“Well, it’s not so bad, Harry. We’ve ramped up the staff this past year so we’re okay there. Where he’s missed is with the planning and ideas and that. But we still get to talk a few times a week and he still has a stake in the business so it’s working out.”

His next stop was at the Ice Cream Haven to say hello to Angelina. As was customary whenever they met Angelina wrapped her long arms around him and held him tightly.

When she loosened her grip she looked at him and asked,

“So how are you feeling, Harry? You look a lot better.”

“I’m doing a lot better, Angelina. The leg’s getting better and now that I’ll be getting out and doing things I won’t feel so bloody useless.”

Angelina could only smile and shake her head at the idea of Harry having ever been useless. With one arm still draped over his shoulder she led him to a small table in one corner of the shop.

“Fancy a cuppa, Harry? I have a kettle on. All this ice cream is well and good but I can’t get through a day without my tea.”

“Sure, that would be great,” he said with a smile.

While Angelina was getting him his tea, he let his eyes roam around the shop. As the onset of spring was making itself felt business was

picking up. His gaze came to rest on the artwork that Abigail had done nearly two years ago. He realized that he still hadn't heard anything from the little girl since his injury. Now that he was able to get around better he resolved to make the trip to Hogwarts to find out what was going on. The last he heard Abigail had still not opened up to anyone about what had disturbed her so deeply. Angelina returned with his tea and they spent half an hour or so talking about business, the Patrollers, and wedding plans. George and Angelina's date was rapidly approaching. Since they both had businesses to run they had no immediate plans for a regular honeymoon but were going to grab a weekend at Blackpool. As to living arrangements the building that contained the ice cream parlor had an apartment upstairs that Angelina had taken when she leased the parlor. She and George would live there for the time being.

Harry told Angelina it was time for him to be getting home and as he stood he could feel the fatigue building in his injured leg. He leaned on his cane as he exchanged embraces with her and then made his way out of the shop. Walking slowly along the pavement towards the exit into the Cauldron Harry was overtaken by the Patrollers-in-training and their trainer.

"Afternoon, Mr. Potter," the Auror said as he came abreast of Harry.

"Good afternoon, how are things going?"

"Quite well, sir. We're developing a good relationship with the shopkeepers and the public seems to like seeing us around. Not picking up much in the way of information but I imagine that will come once we've established more trust."

Harry just nodded and then he looked back over his shoulder at the two trainees, including Ron.

"How are you two getting along?"

"Good, sir," they replied in unison. Harry gave Ron a little smirk and the redhead rolled his eyes a bit in response.

“Well, carry on, gentlemen. Oh, and thanks for before with Malfoy. I don’t think he’s crazy enough to have tried anything but you never know. Plus it gave people the idea we were in control of the situation.”

“You’re welcome, sir,” the Auror replied and then they moved on past Harry.

It took Harry two days to make arrangements for his trip to Hogwarts. He was going to have to take a muggle train as far north as Glasgow and then a friend of Bill’s who married a muggle was going to meet him there and drive him the rest of the way to Hogsmeade. The trip took him the better part of a day and it was after dark by the time the car dropped him on the outskirts of the town. His leg was stiff and he slowly walked into the village. He was making his way to the Three Broomsticks run by Madame Rosemerta for dinner. He was perhaps half way to his goal when he heard someone call out.

“Harry? I mean, Mr. Potter, sir?”

Harry turned and saw a female figure walking towards him in Patrollers robes. The familiar face of Alicia Spinnet appeared in a streetlamp.

“Hello, Alicia. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing great, sir. We just came off duty a little while ago. I was getting ready to head for home. What brings you up this way, if it’s okay to ask?” his former Quidditch teammate asked him.

“I have an appointment up at the school tomorrow. I’m not quite ready to start Apparating yet so I had to do it the hard way.”

“How are you feeling, Harry? Opps, sorry, geez, this is going to be tricky, isn’t,” she said.

“It is a bit odd but since we’re off duty, ‘Harry’ is fine. As for how I’m doing, I’m doing better. The leg is a little weak but I think that’s mostly from lack of use. I’ll be fine soon enough.”

“Well, I better let you get going, Harry. It was good to see you up and around. You really scared us this time, you know. Take care of yourself, sir,” she said with added emphasis on the last word, smiling.

“You too, Alicia,” he said smiling back.

Harry watched as Alicia continued down the street and then he turned and made his way to the pub. He passed Weasleys' but it was already closed for the night. He pushed the door to the pub open and stepped inside. It was crowded but not packed and as he approached the bar, the proprietress looked up and exclaimed.

“Harry Potter! What brings you to my humble pub?”

“Dinner, I hope. I have an appointment at the school tomorrow and I'm staying overnight. Do you have a table for me?”

“Well, of course we do and if you haven't made other arrangements you can use the spare room upstairs.”

“Thank you, Madame Rosemerta, but I wouldn't want to impose on you,” Harry said.

“Impose? You have an awful long way to go before you become an imposition around here, young fellow. Your Patrollers already more than paid for the room when they stopped some rowdies from breaking up my furniture. Sit yourself down right over there and I'll be right over,” she said.

During his conversation with Rosemerta Harry had failed to notice how quiet it had gotten in the taproom. As he turned to make his way to the table he saw that everyone was looking at him. He let his eyes roam over the faces of the crowd and he recognized several Hogwarts faculty at one table, giving them a polite nod and for the rest whom he didn't recognize he smiled as he passed them on the way to the small empty table that had been indicated by the proprietress.

He had barely seated himself when she bustled over. Harry noticed that while nearly ten years older than when he had first met her, she

still possessed the attractiveness that had so befuddled poor Ron whenever he saw her. She was smiling as she approached his table.

“Now then, Mr. Potter, what can we do for you?”

“First, you can call me Harry. It’s not that long since I was a third year coming in here for my first butterbeer. I think I’ll have one tonight, please, and a steak and kidney pie.”

“Alright, Harry. Coming up.”

The conversations in the room resumed and Harry took the time before his dinner arrived to enjoy his butterbeer and just look around the room. He was thinking of how things were going to go tomorrow. He had sent an owl to the Headmistress to make sure that she and Abigail were aware he was going to be there. Professor McGonagall intimated in her reply that she was very happy that Harry was coming. While not coming right out and stating it, Harry read between the lines that she was quite concerned with the little girl but hadn’t wanted to burden Harry while he was recuperating. He was still deep in this line of thought when his dinner was placed on the table. Within an hour he had finished his meal and was in bed in the room at the back of the second floor of the pub.

At seven thirty the following morning Harry was roused from a deep dreamless sleep by a familiar voice.

“Sweetheart, wake up.”

“What? Ginny, is that you?” Harry said, his voice slurred with sleep.

“Yes, it is. Madame Rosemerta let me in.”

Harry looked up from his pillow and saw the mass of red hair and bright smile. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and sat up. Ginny leaned in and wrapped him in a warm embrace and gave him a kiss. She then sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I’m thrilled to see you, Ginny, but what are you doing here? I thought you were going to be in Holyhead all week.”

"I was but I was able to persuade Ms. Hapnafi to give me the day off. I've been so worried about Abigail I just couldn't stay away. I hope you don't mind. Can I come with you to see her?" Ginny asked, her voice full of concern.

"I think that would be fine, Ginny. But if I think she and I need to be alone at some point, you'll give us that privacy?"

"Of course, Harry."

Ginny waited while Harry got himself cleaned up and ready for what could prove to be a difficult day. They had breakfast downstairs and then proceeded to walk up to the school. Harry's mobility was improving but he still had to move at less than his usual pace. With Ginny walking beside him it reminded him of the walks they took around the Burrow during that first summer. They climbed the steps to the front door and knocked. After a few moments the door was pulled open and an elderly Filch just waved them in and pushed the door closed again. Harry and Ginny grinned at each other as they made their way up to the Heads office. The guardian statue was already moved aside and the two climbed the stairs to the anteroom where they found Professor McGonagall waiting.

"Harry, Miss Weasley. I'm very glad to see you. We've been growing increasingly concerned with Miss Westwood. She's been holding her own with her school work but she hasn't said a word since she regained consciousness after your injury, Harry.

She barely eats and she's lost all interest in flying her broomstick. Her roommates have said that she sleeps very little and when she does it's very restless. We simply don't know what's wrong. I hope you can get through to her. I had thought you could meet her here. It's about as private as we can get. She should be arriving any time now."

Harry simply nodded, his face set and grim. Ginny has holding his right hand in both of hers, her lower lip pinched between her teeth. In only a few moments the sound of small feet were heard on the steps leading up to where they sat. Harry looked up and what he saw appalled him. Abigail had always been a slightly built girl but now

she looked like a wraith. He large dark eyes stared out from a gaunt face with deep dark hollows under them. Harry could hear Ginny gasp from beside him. That sound seemed to penetrate the little girl's state a bit as she stopped and seemed to see Harry for the first time. Her large dark eyes locked onto his of bright green and held fast. As they looked at each other the little girl began to tremble, her eyes misting over and her lower lip quivered.

Harry stood up and as if that movement broke a spell the little girl began to stumble forward, her hands reaching for him in desperation. Harry took two steps forward to meet her, fearing she was going to fall. He gathered her up into his arms, feeling her own weak embrace. The physical contact seemed to break a barrier within the little girl and she began to cry. The sound was a shock to the three adults who were so used to the airy, almost breathless voice they had come to know. What they heard now was a high pitched keening wail that sounded more animal than human. Harry tightened his grip in an attempt to lend some strength to the child whose entire body was shuddering as her emotions poured out. With little apparent effort Harry was able to lift Abigail off her feet and step back to where he could sit down, aided by Ginny. He sat with Abigail pulled onto his lap, his cheek resting on the top of her head, rocking back and forth.

Ginny was at a loss as to what to do. It had been a month since the last time she had seen the little girl and she was stunned at how her physical condition had deteriorated. Her own visits had failed to get any real response out of Abigail but apparently Harry had provided the trigger, whatever that had been. She could only guess at what sort of bond had developed between them. The crying continued for some minutes. Harry looked up at Ginny and then at the Headmistress, his own eyes brimming over. Ginny understood that he was asking to be left alone and with a head signal and raised eyebrows she transmitted that request to the Head. Professor McGonagall nodded and the two women stood up and with a final soft stroke of Ginny's hand along Harry's shoulder they left down the stairway and out into the corridor.

As the guardian statue swung shut the wailing cry could be heard echoing down the staircase. The teacher and former student stood staring at the statue for some time before one broke the silence.

"You know, Professor," Ginny began, "what with the Chamber of Secrets and that night in the Mystery's Department and all the rest I thought I've seen some scary things but that just topped my list, I think. I don't think I've ever heard someone cry like that."

"Nor I, Miss Weasley," the Headmistress replied. "I have to admit, I'm at a complete loss. Has Harry said anything to you that might shed some light on this situation?"

"He did, as best as he was able to explain it. I'm not really able to discuss it though. Harry tends to be a bit tight lipped about a lot of the things that have happened to him. Perhaps if he has any luck with Abigail he'd be willing to tell you about it."

Professor McGonagall merely nodded, her lips drawn tight. They turned and walked away from the now sealed doorway. It wasn't until nearly three hours later that the statue swung aside and Harry stepped out into the corridor with Abigail cradled in his arms, unmoving. Fortunately the password had not been changed since the last time he was there. Moving slowly as he no longer had his cane for assistance he carried the small girl to the hospital wing. He passed two groups of students moving between classes. In both cases the normally noisy students stood in stunned silence as Harry moved past them. He arrived at the door to the ward and with a foot knocked for admittance. Within a moment the door swung open and Madame Pomfrey stood there.

"My goodness, Harry. What in the world?" she said.

"I'm sorry to intrude, Madame Pomfrey. I need to put Abigail to bed and then keep an eye on her. May I?"

"Of course, Harry. Put her in the bed at the far end so there won't be any disturbances. May I ask what has happened?"

"Certainly, it is your hospital after all," Harry replied with a tired smile. "She cried herself to sleep. She seemed to be pretty exhausted to start with."

Harry followed Madame Pomfrey to the last bed on that side of the ward. As she pulled back the blanket and top sheet Harry carefully placed Abigail down and then stood back so that the nurse could remove the girls robe. The covers were then pulled up and Harry sat down on a chair that was nearby. He stretched his injured leg out in front of him with a slight grimace. It did not go unnoticed.

“Are you alright, Harry? Is the leg still bothering you?”

“A little bit. She weighs next to nothing but...” he said with a small smile and a shrug.

“Let me get you something for it then,” she said as she bustled away.

She returned with a small bag that she placed on Harry’s leg and almost immediately a gentle warmth began to flow into the fatigued muscles and stiff knee joint. He sat back and sighed.

“This feels really great, Madame Pomfrey, thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Harry. Do you need anything else?”

“Could you send a message to the Headmistress and let her know Abigail and I are here?”

“Of course, Harry.”

Madame Pomfrey walked toward her office and Harry settled into the chair a bit more and he focused his attention on Abigail. She remained motionless with the exception of shallow breathing. He thought back to how she had continued to cry for nearly an hour before she drifted off to sleep. She slept fitfully for perhaps forty five minutes before she woke up but instead of the wailing cry she emitted a piteous whimper that made up in misery what it lacked in sound power. Harry had tried to sooth her but he didn’t seem to be making any head way when once more she slipped into sleep but this time it was peaceful. He had finally decided that she needed to be put to bed but thought the hospital ward would be a better idea then her own room. So now he sat and waited.

The soothing warmth that was soaking into Harry's leg was also working on the rest of his body and he was sinking into a deep relaxed state. While not really asleep he was less than wide awake so he was unaware when Ginny quietly approached Abigail's bed from the other side. She knelt down and reached out to brush some of the long dark locks from the little girl's face. She was still very pale except the dark hollows under her eyes. Ginny looked over at Harry, seeing his measured breathing and heavily lidded eyes. Again, she wondered what was the link between these two, how deep did it go and what did it mean for the future, their future? She slowly stood up and quietly left the room, leaving them to get what rest they could.

Had she remained a few moments longer she would have seen Abigail begin moving beneath the blanket. Harry's eyes opened and his hand reached out to lightly stroke the pale cheek of the child, who responded with a deep sigh. She settled back into the bed and Harry leaned back into his chair. He removed the bag from his leg and stood up to walk about the ward, but never beyond sight or sound of the bed at the far end. Several times Madame Pomfrey came in to check on both Harry and Abigail. The last time she brought in a tray that contained several plates that contained slices of meat, bread, and cheese and a pitcher of pumpkin juice.

"I suggest you get something to eat, Harry. And when she wakes up, try and get her to eat as well. Goodness knows she needs it."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll try," Harry replied quietly.

Madame Pomfrey smiled and returned to her office. It was perhaps an hour later when she heard Harry's voice asking a question. She held her breath until she heard a barely audible reply and she smiled. Had she been closer she would have heard Harry say,

"Abigail? Are you awake?"

Harry had heard Abigail begin to stir and he returned to his chair. As he watched her face he saw her eyelids begin to flutter and then open wide. She was obviously disoriented and she looked frightened.

"It's okay, Abigail. You're in the hospital ward. How are you doing?" he said softly.

"S-s-sir?" she asked with a quavering voice.

"Yes, Abigail, it's me."

Harry saw her eyes begin to mist and he slid from his chair to the side of the bed and took her in his arms again. He felt her hold on, more tightly than before and perhaps more importantly she wasn't crying or whimpering. He held her, gently rubbing her back. After a few moments he felt her relax and he took that as a good sign. As he held her he quietly began to talk to her.

"Abigail. Can you tell me what's been going on? What happened to you?"

He felt her squeeze tightly once more and then release her grip on him. He let his arms slide from around her so she could move slightly away from him but he held onto her hands to reassure her. She looked at him with those big dark eyes, misty with tears but clearer than when he had first seen her earlier. She sniffed loudly and then looked down at her lap.

"You won't be angry with me will you, sir?" she said barely beyond a whisper.

"Angry?" Harry asked incredulously. "Why would I possibly be angry with you?"

"I've caused a lot of trouble lately, sir." she said.

"Abigail. You've had us worried but you didn't cause any trouble. You saved my life, Abigail. You didn't forget that, did you?" Harry said softly.

"I remember, sir. But that's when things started to go bad and I didn't do what you told me and it got worse and worse and now..." she finished with a long sigh.

Harry also noticed that her eyes had drifted towards the tray near the bed. Harry picked up a slice of cheese and offered it to her. She reached out and took it. She nibbled the cheese and looked away from Harry.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Abigail. Please try and tell me what happened. Try and start from the beginning."

She had eaten about half the slice and popped the rest into her mouth. As she chewed she looked back at Harry, fixing on his bright green eyes. As she swallowed she shrugged heavily and let out a long breath.

"It started when you fought that dragon. While I was sitting in class I got that feeling that something big was going to happen. I had been working on blocking you out so that I wouldn't see things I shouldn't and I guess that kept me from seeing what was going on with the dragon. But then I guess you got burned and I felt the pain and I yelled and then passed out. They told me I was unconscious for two whole weeks. All I know is that I started having really strange dreams."

She looked back at the tray and Harry handed her a slice of bread. He also poured out a mug full of juice and placed it on the night stand beside the bed. Abigail took a bite of the bread and then a large gulp of the juice. She then resumed her narration.

"At first it was hard to see what I was dreaming. But then I could see it was a lady's face and the sound of someone trying to talk to me. I would start to see details of her face or pick out words but it was hard. Then it all started to get clearer. I could see her face clearly and realized who it was."

She looked at Harry and her face got tighter.

"It's okay, Abigail. Who was it?" he asked but the tightening in his stomach told him he thought he already knew.

"It was your mother, sir. I could tell because of her eyes. They looked just like yours. She was saying they needed my help."

"They'?" Harry asked through a tight throat.

"Yes, sir, that's what she said. She said you were hurt and might die if I didn't come and bring you home. I didn't know what she meant. As she tried to explain I started to see another face and I knew right away it was your father. You look just like him, except the color of your eyes. Did you know that?"

Harry just nodded.

"Anyways, as your mum talked to me I started to understand what I had to do. You were so hurt and tired that you might not come back from where you were. Your parents couldn't go to help you because they were afraid that if you saw them you'd want to stay. Your mother said all I had to do was open my mind to you and I would be able to find you and lead you back. So I dropped the blocks that I had learned to use and there you were. I could see you standing by a statue in the middle of a town. You were talking to someone with long scraggly hair. Who was that, sir?"

"His name is Sirius Black. He was my dad's best friend and my godfather," Harry said quietly.

"Well, that's when I came to bring you home, sir," she said.

"I remember that, Abigail. I'm very grateful that you did. You reminded me I had a lot of reasons to keep living."

"I was glad to help you, sir. It was after that when things got bad."

"Why was that?"

"Well, soon after that I woke up. But I could remember everything that happened. I remembered your mother's face. I could see how much she loved you. So much that even dead she could help you live. Your dad was there, too. It reminded me that my parents are gone and I didn't think that they could ever do that for me. It made me feel like I

did when I first came to Hogwarts, before you told me about the wizarding family. But it's worse now, sir."

"What do you mean, Abigail? What's wrong?"

"Oh, sir. Last year we had to put my granddad in a nursing home. You know, one of those places for people that can't take care of themselves? He doesn't know who we are anymore. And then just after I came back for my third year I found out that my grandma got sick and they don't know if she'll get well and I don't know where I'm supposed to go when the school year is over and I feel so alone again," she was saying, her voice sounding more desperate and tinged with the raw emotion that drove her crying earlier.

As tears began to course down her cheeks Harry took hold of her again and held her tightly. He brought his cheek to rest on her head and rocked her gently. He spoke softly to her.

"Abigail. When I said you were part of a bigger family, I meant just that. I'm very sorry to hear about your grandparents, but if they can't take care of you, we will. You are not alone, ok?" he said quietly but emphatically.

He felt her pull her head back trying to look up at him. He eased his grip on her and let some space grow between them.

"You'd do that, sir? You'd let me live with you and Ginny?"

"Of course. What is it I always tell you?" he said with a little smile.

"That's what family is for?" she said timidly.

"Exactly. So is that what happened? You were so afraid of what might happen that you tried to shut it all out?" he asked.

"I guess so, I don't know. I just got so sad and depressed and worried and I didn't know what to do and..." she tailed off.

"Well, I think this is what you should do. I think you should stop worrying about what's going to happen to you because I'm here to tell

you that no matter what happens you will have a place to go and people to be there for you. Do you believe that?" Harry asked her.

She sniffed loudly again and nodded slightly. For the first time since his injury, she smiled, slightly but it was still a smile.

"I also think that what you should do is have some more of what is on this platter and then a good nights sleep and we'll get together tomorrow and see what we can do about all of this. How does that sound?"

"It sounds good, sir. I am kinda hungry."

Harry smiled and took the tray and placed it in front of her and sat back and watched her eat. By the time she was through nearly the whole contents of the plate had disappeared as well as a significant portion of the jug of pumpkin juice. Her eyelids were drooping and her head was nodding so Harry cleared away the tray and helped Abigail settle back into the pillow and tucked the blanket up. He stood up and stretched and walked toward Madame Pomfrey's office. She heard him approach and came out to meet him.

"She's sleeping. She did a fairly good job on the cheese and bread. We talked for a while, too. Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

"Not quite two in the afternoon, Harry."

"Ok, can you keep an eye on her? I'm going to look for Ginny and Professor McGonagall."

"Of course, Harry," Madame Pomfrey said, looking at him with appraising eyes. "That was a wonderful thing you did, Harry."

Harry just shrugged and smiled. Then he left the hospital ward and went in search of Ginny and Professor McGonagall. His first stop was the Head's office. He retrieved his cane and began the walk down to the Great Hall. He walked in through the main entrance and saw a number of students seated about the long tables. He approached a group of older students and inquired if they had seen either Ginny or the Professor. He was directed to the room behind the faculty table

where the TriWizards competitors gathered years before. As he entered, Ginny was the first to notice him. She bolted from her chair and ran to him.

“Harry. How is Abigail?”

“She’s doing better. We had a long talk, she’s eaten and now she’s sleeping, comfortably. I found out what was troubling her. Let’s sit down and I’ll tell you and Professor McGonagall,” Harry told her as he led her back over to her seat by the Headmistress.

They sat down and Professor McGonagall smiled at Harry.

“Good news I trust, Harry?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s a pretty terrible story but I think we can figure out a satisfactory ending.”

He then proceeded to recount his conversation with Abigail. As he related how Abigail had sunk into despair Ginny began to tear up and Professor McGonagall’s mouth became a thin tight line.

“So I was finally able to convince her that if her grandmother wasn’t able to take care of her anymore she could rely on us. I never realized how afraid someone could be about being alone,” Harry said softly.

“Harry, you’ve done a wonderful thing here today. I don’t mind saying we were at our wits end,” the Headmistress said. “She’s a very lucky young lady to have found you.”

Harry smiled as he replied,

“I was thinking I was the lucky one.”

Ginny smiled through her tears and gave Harry’s arm a squeeze.

“You’ll stay for dinner?” the Headmistress asked.

"I don't have much choice, Professor. No Disapparating for me yet. How about you, Ginny?"

"I can stay for dinner but then I need to get back to Holyhead tonight," Ginny replied.

"Are you sure, Ginny? It's been a rough day. Wouldn't it be better if you got a good night's sleep and then go to Holyhead early in the morning when you're rested," Harry asked.

"He's right, Miss Weasley. I think it would be best if the two of you stayed here tonight. If Miss Westwood should wake up it would be beneficial that you are here to reassure her," the Professor offered.

"You're probably right. But where will we sleep, Harry? The Three Broomsticks?"

"No need, Miss Weasley. You can use the rooms that Harry and Miss Granger used their last year. They haven't been occupied since you left, Harry. I'll notify the Gryffindor Prefects. You'll be guests at the faculty table tonight. You deserve that at least. I suggest you stay here and relax until dinner."

"Yes, ma'am," they replied in unison.

Professor McGonagall smiled at them as she stood up and left the room. Ginny sat across from Harry looking at him, her gaze wandering over his face.

"You look tired, sweetheart," she said softly.

"I am a bit. More emotionally than physically but all for a good cause. We need to get in touch with her grandmother and figure out how bad things really are. Then we can go from there."

She smiled a little at him and then her expression turned a bit more somber. She looked at him again; her head tilted a bit to the side.

"Does it bother you, Harry?" she asked a bit cryptically.

“What, Abigail?” he responded, a bit confused.

“No, I mean being the problem solver.”

“What are you driving at, Ginny?”

“Ever since I’ve known you you’ve been solving someone else’s problems. You saved the Sorcerer’s Stone from Voldemort, saved me from Tom Riddle and the Basilisk, cleared Sirius and on and on and on. Not to mention bringing Voldemort down for good. Now you’re trying to save the Ministry from itself and poor Abigail. It all seems so unfair.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is, but who ever said life was supposed to be fair. It is what it is and you make the best of it you can. I’m alive when by all accounts I shouldn’t be. I call that a fair trade,” he said giving her one of his half smiles.

All Ginny could do was smile back with a little shake of her head. Harry then pulled his notebook out of his robe pocket and with the stub of a muggle pencil he began to jot down some notes.

“Now that it seems like I can start getting out and about more I better figure out how to make up for some of the lost time. Hermione and I still need to come out and see the Centaurs. Patroller training is underway but I’ve done practically nothing there and that can’t continue. I need to get a message to Fleur so she can help set up that trip to Beauxbaton. I promised Professor LeMond I’d do that in the spring which is almost here. And there’s the wedding come August and we’ve done nothing with that except talk,” the last he said with a frown.

“Ah, afraid you’re wrong there my most marvelous solver of problems,” Ginny said with an impish grin. “Once you were on the road to recovery, Mum dove into wedding planning full speed. She’s got George and Angelina all settled for the third Saturday in May and she and I have been working with Hogwarts to get you and I taken care of. Unless you have any objections it looks like the first Saturday in August. The invitation list is pretty big but so is the Great Hall so fitting everyone in shouldn’t be any trouble. Even Kreacher has been

helping out since he got to know all the kitchen help when he was up here with you. So you can scratch that concern off your list there.”

Harry smiled and drew a line through the few words he had jotted down referring to the wedding.

“We do need to figure out who the wedding party is going to be though, Harry. I know you asked Ron to be your best man but there’s ushers and my maid of honor and the rest.”

“You haven’t asked anyone to be your maid of honor yet?”

“Well it’s hard, Harry. It’s not like I have one super best friend like you do with Ron. I have lots of friends and it’s hard to pick just one. I’ll have to really think about it,” she replied.

“Well I hope you don’t mind if I don’t try and solve this one particular problem,” he said with a perfectly straight face.

“I don’t mind at all, Harry. This is a girl thing and we’ll take care of it,” she replied.

“Well, as far as the Centaurs are concerned maybe I can deal with that while I’m here, if Hermione can get here. I’ll use school owls. I’ll send Fleur a message as well to get that going. Guess I’ll take the train to Paris. I’m not planning on any Disapparating any time soon.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Maybe I can get your dad to build me an Anglia to get around in,” Harry said matter-of-factly.

Ginny hit him with a seat cushion.

It was a while latter that the increase in noise level informed Harry and Ginny that the dinner hour had arrived so they made their way out to the faculty table to find two spots opened on either side of Bill.

“Hey there you two, I heard that you were here today. I understand you had some success with Abigail Westwood, Harry. I can’t tell you

how relieved I was. Her condition these last couple of weeks was really getting scary,” Bill said.

“Well I hope I was able to get through to her, I think I did. What I don’t understand is how it was allowed to get so bad,” Harry said with some annoyance.

“Well, Harry, you can only go so far. She did have several stays in the hospital ward. Sleeping potions only help so much. And its not like you can stuff food down her throat,” Bill replied.

“I know, Bill, but it’s frustrating none the less.”

“I know, Harry, but fortunately for her she has you. I thought that in the end that was what it was going to take,” Ginny’s big brother said.

They took their seats and changed the subject. Bill and Harry talked a little about another lecture now that he was able to get around and then he talked to both of them about the wedding.

“I think it’s a great idea, Harry. All things considered you’d have to say it’s the perfect location. It doesn’t show on the surface but there’s a lot of excitement about it around here. The only one who doesn’t like it is Filch. He’s been complaining non stop since Professor McGonagall made the announcement. It got so bad that she’s giving him the weeks before and after the wedding as extra holiday just so he won’t be here,” Bill said with a laugh.

“Really? That’s too bad. I was going to ask him to be one of my ushers,” Harry said off handedly.

Bill and Ginny tried in vain to stifle their laughter. It was a pleasant dinner and afterward Harry and Ginny took a slow walk up to the hospital wing to look in on Abigail. While there was no significant pain, Harry’s left leg would still tire easily and the burn scar around the knee tended to hamper his gait. By the time they reached the little waiting room he was relying heavily on the cane. A light rap on the door brought Madame Pomfrey to the door.

“She hasn’t moved or made a sound since you left, Harry. I’ve been checking on her every quarter hour or so and her breathing is strong and her color is improving a bit. I think we may have finally turned the corner with her.”

Madame Pomfrey said all this in a hushed voice while they walked to where the child slept soundly. Harry knelt down on one knee next to the bed and brought his head close to her ear and whispered something. He then kissed her lightly on the forehead. Ginny wasn’t sure but in the dim light of the ward she thought she saw a slight smile pass briefly across Abigail’s face. Harry levered himself up with his cane and smiled at Ginny who then added her own brief kiss on one cheek.

“If she wakes up during the night and needs me, just send word. Otherwise we’ll come by first thing in the morning,” Harry told the nurse.

“Get some rest, Harry. If I’m any judge, she should sleep through the night,” replied Madame Pomfrey.

Harry and Ginny now made the slow journey to the Gryffindor tower passing groups of students and solitary members of the faculty. All inquired about Harry’s health and congratulated them both on their impending wedding. On two occasions they were stopped and Ginny signed autographs for avid fans from both Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.

Harry could see how pleased that made her and he resolved to tease her later about her spreading fame. They gave the password to the portrait that had been given to them during dinner by one of the Gryffindor prefects and the Fat Lady swung open with a cherry ‘Hello’ to them both. Their arrival had obviously been announced as two chairs before the fireplace had been left vacant and Harry gratefully sank into one. The warmth of the fire felt good on his leg. He and Ginny made a few tentative attempts at conversation with the students in the common room and once they managed to break the ice they spent a pleasant few hours talking about Quidditch, the Patrollers, schoolwork and life in general. No one mentioned anything about dragons.

As it got late Ginny finally brought the discussions to an end by suggesting they all needed to get some sleep. She insisted on walking up to Harry's room with him and by the time they were half way up he was glad she did. They had gone up and down a lot of stairs and walked a fair amount during the day and despite a lot of sitting his left leg was starting to show signs of wear and tear. He was beginning to wonder if it would ever get better. Perhaps a visit to St. Mungo's for some advice would be wise. As before the key was in the lock and when the door swung open he saw the room was clean and several candles burning. It would seem the house elves had been busy. He was fairly certain that when he woke up his clothes and robes would be thoroughly cleaned and pressed.

Harry pulled Ginny into his arms and held on to her for a while. He let her pull back a bit so they could look at each other and he smiled.

"Thanks for being here today, Ginny. It helped a lot."

"I'm glad I could be here, for the both of you," she said seriously.

She pulled his head down and gave him a brief but loving kiss and then turned toward the door. She looked back over her shoulder as she started to pull the door closed.

"Sleep well, my hero," she said softly and pulled the door closed behind her.

Harry undressed for bed; laying out his clothes on a chair which he was sure would be collected just after he fell asleep. His sleep was deep and dreamless and when he awoke he was mentally alert, emotionally calm and the only physical difficulty was the achiness in his left knee. As he looked out from his bed he could see his clothes neatly folded and stacked on his chair, his shoes polished to a high gloss and a bag with a note on his night stand. The note read,

"Harry,

I know you'd been up and down stairs all day yesterday. Here is one of the heat bags like you used yesterday morning. I hope it helps.

Madame P.”

Harry could only smile as he took the bag and placed it on his left knee as he lay propped up on his pillow. The soothing warmth began to flow and in moments he could feel the ache diminish and the stiffness ease. He let it go on for about fifteen minutes and then he got himself up and used the wash basin that had been provided to clean up and then get dressed. He was just getting done with his shoes when he heard a rapping on his door.

“Harry? Are you awake yet?” he heard his favorite voice say.

“Come on in, Ginny.”

The door swung open and Ginny stepped in, looking fresh and ready for the day. As Harry stood up she took two steps to meet him and wrapped her arms around him and kissed him in a way that left him dizzy and breathless. When she leaned back but still holding him Harry looked down at her and said,

“Wow, what was that for?”

“What was it for? You silly man,” she replied. “It’s for the fact that I love you, you’ve shown me again that you are the most caring, compassionate person I could ever hope to meet and because I have to leave if I’m to get back to Holyhead in time. I won’t see you again until Sunday but I hope to be there by noon. Will that be okay?”

“No it won’t because it’s far too long until I see you, but it will have to do. But if that’s the case,” he said and then he pulled her tight to him and he kissed her back in a fashion that left them both breathless and dizzy.

When they got their breath back Harry grabbed his cane and they began the long trek down the stairs to the common room. They waved and Ginny said her goodbyes to the few students in the room and then they went out through the opening to the corridor.

“Harry, you head straight to the hospital wing. I don’t want you going up and down more stairs than you need to. Give this to Abigail,” and

she handed him a folded piece of parchment, “and tell her that I’ll send her more notes by owl this week. And Harry, what ever needs to be done for her, I’m right there with you, ok?”

“Thanks, Ginny,” Harry replied quietly.

With one last brief kiss Ginny left him in the corridor to go their separate ways, for the moment. Harry watched her go and then turned and headed for the hospital ward. He made his way slowly and hugged the wall to stay out of the way of students who were making their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast. He finally reached the ward door and rapped on it. In a few moments the door swung open and Madame Pomfrey let him in.

“How is she doing,” he asked.

“I don’t think she woke up once all night. As I passed her to let you in, she seemed to be stirring a bit. Go have a look.”

“Ok, oh and thank you for the heating bag this morning. It was a big help,” Harry said softly.

“Not at all, Harry. I’ll have one for you to take home with you. It will last for a few months before it needs to be remade. Your house elf should be able to replace the mixture that makes the heat. I’ll include the instructions,” the nurse replied with a smile.

“You’re a life saver, Madame Pomfrey, as usual.”

By now they were approaching the bed where Abigail lay. Her long hair was still fanned out on her pillow and it did indeed appear to Harry that she hadn’t moved from when he last saw her the night before. He walked over to the bed and pulled the chair over and sat down. He reached out and brushed a lock of hair back away from her face. She must have been near to awakening already as her eyes opened at the touch.

“Hello, sir,” she said in her soft voice. “Have you been here all night?” Her voice held a note of concern.

“No, Abigail. I had a very good night’s sleep in the Gryffindor tower. So did Ginny. She had to leave this morning but she left you a note. She’ll write to you more this week. How are you feeling?”

“Um, I feel pretty good. A little hungry and I really need to use the ladies if I could.”

Madame Pomfrey let out a brief laugh and asked Abigail if she could walk or did she want to take a ride in the wheelchair.

“Oh, I’ll walk.”

Madame Pomfrey came to the side of the bed opposite of where Harry sat and pulled back the covers and offered Abigail her hand. She then helped the tiny girl up and walked with her to the ladies washroom and went inside with her. Harry sat back and thought that the signs were good. Ten minutes later the door to the washroom opened and a fully awake and refreshed Abigail walked quickly up to Harry’s side and flung her arms around his neck. Harry wrapped one arm around her back and pulled her tight for a moment.

“You look much better, little one,” Harry said.

“I’m feeling much better, sir. I’m sorry you had to come here with all you have to do,” Abigail said softly.

“Don’t be sorry, Abigail. I owe you a lot and I’m only too happy to be here. Now, I think you need to have some breakfast,” Harry said turning to look at Madame Pomfrey.

“Should she eat here or can she go down to the Great Hall?”

“Well, let’s ask the young lady. Abigail, do you feel well enough to go down to the Great Hall for breakfast?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll go slow and I have a free period this morning so I think it will be ok,” she said looking at the nurse. She turned toward Harry and said,

“Will you be coming with me, sir?”

“Of course I will. Frankly, I’m starved. I’ll wait for you outside while you get dressed.”

“Yes, sir,” she said happily.

Harry smiled and got up and walked back out to the waiting room. He had to laugh to himself that for once he was the one doing the waiting. He was quickly joined by Madame Pomfrey who stood looking at Harry for a moment and then took hold of his hand in both of hers.

“Bless you, Harry. I’m not exaggerating when I tell you that you saved that little girl’s life.”

“She saved mine not too long ago so I owed her that much,” he said with a half smile.

The door swung open and the subject of their discussion walked out, her robe cleaned and freshly pressed. Obviously the house elves had been busy last night. Offering Abigail his left hand Harry said,

“We’ll be back later, Madame Pomfrey.”

“Go slowly you two,” she admonished them kindly.

Harry and Abigail walked hand-in-hand slowly down the corridor and stairway that led to the Great Hall where breakfast was still to be had. Harry stopped them just inside the entrance and looked about for a place to sit. He saw that several spaces were open at the senior end of the Ravenclaw table. They walked up and when several of the students looked up he asked,

“May we?”

“Um, well, sure, Mr. Potter. Please, sit down,” a seventh year witch replied.

“Thank you,” Harry replied.

Harry sat at the end of table and Abigail sat between him and a seventh year boy and directly across from the girl that asked them to sit. The older girl was looking at Abigail.

"Abigail. You look sooo much better this morning. Are you doing better?"

"Yes, thank you. Mr. Potter came and he helped me get through my problem. He can solve any problem," she said, her ethereal voice happy if only barely audible.

"I don't know about that, Abigail. I never solved the problem of staying out of the hospital wing during any one year," Harry said with a laugh as he filled Abigail's plate.

This got a laugh from those seated around them. Harry filled his place next. The older Ravenclaw looked at Harry next and asked,

"And how are you doing, sir? We all heard about you being injured and we hadn't seen you much this year..." she finished with a bit of a shrug.

"I'm doing a lot better these days, thank you, uh, Miss...?"

"Binsworthy, sir. Allison Binsworthy."

"Binsworthy? Are you related to Deputy Minister Binsworthy?"

"My dad, sir," she said with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I may be out of line a little but my dad's pretty impressed with what you've been doing with the Aurors, sir. When you got hurt the whole place was in an uproar, he said."

The girl seemed to think she went too far and went bright red. Harry smiled and looked at her.

"Don't be embarrassed, Miss Binsworthy. I can imagine what it was like. I've managed to stir things up a time or two in my life," he said with a laugh and he saw that the girl relaxed.

He took the time to look down and see how Abigail was doing. She had nearly cleared her plate but she was looking up and watching him as she ate. She had that far off look like she was seeing something elsewhere.

"Everything ok, Abigail?"

"Yes, sir. I was just watching Ginny do her warm ups. I read her note and I just wanted to see her again this morning," she said with a smile.

"Thank you, Abigail. Now I know she got home safely," Harry said. "Is that going to be enough for you breakfast?"

"Yes, sir. I don't want to stuff myself, I might get sick."

"Smart girl."

"We have to get going, Mr. Potter," Allison said. "It was nice to see you this morning. And thank you for helping Abigail. We were all pretty worried about her," the girl said, smiling at Abigail. Abigail smiled back.

"My pleasure, Miss Binsworthy. Enjoy your day," Harry replied. Then he looked down at Abigail. "So Miss Westwood, what would you like to do this morning?"

"Can we sit outside in the sun? I'd like to feel the warmth on my face."

"Good idea. Let's walk past the faculty table so we can let the Headmistress know how you're doing."

"Yes, sir."

They got up and walked slowly down the aisle to the head table. Most of the faculty were still there and they saw Harry walking with the diminutive psychic girl toward them. A great deal of whispered conversation ensued. The Headmistress stood up and met them at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the dais.

“My word, Mr. Potter. You are a wizard indeed. Miss Westwood looks so much better.”

“I’m feeling a lot better, Professor McGonagall,” Abigail said softly.

She was holding tight to Harry’s hand as she talked to the Headmistress.

“We were going to go outside for a bit, ma’am and soak up some sun. We’ll come back in for lunch and see how she’s doing.”

“Very well, Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall said with a small smile. “We will see you later.”

Harry and Abigail walked out the front door and down the steps. They found a bench that faced into the morning sun and sat down. They sat for some time letting the sun warm their faces and in Harry’s case, his injured leg. After about half an hour later Harry felt Abigail slump against him. She had been lulled to sleep by the quiet and the warmth. Harry settled her down so that she was curled up on the bench with her head pillowed by his good leg. Despite all the tumult of the last months, Harry was feeling at peace. At some point he heard footsteps on the path behind him.

“Is she asleep, Harry?”

“Yes, Professor, for the last half hour or so,” said quietly over his shoulder to the Headmistress.

She came around to the front of the bench and looked down at the sleeping girl.

“I imagine she has a lot of sleep to catch up on.”

“Yes, ma’am. Would you like to sit down, this might take a while.”

The Headmistress sat down on the opposite side of Harry. They went back over what Harry had found out and discussed the amazing phenomenon that he and she had shared. It was something

completely beyond the Headmistress' long experience. Harry finished up by saying,

"So it looks like she is going to be orphaned all over again. That's what terrified her so much. I told her that if her grandmother wasn't able to care of her anymore because of her illness Ginny and I would make sure she was ok. That was after all the crying, of course. I guess she needed to release all that pent up anxiety."

The Headmistress was quiet for a time and then Harry felt her take his hand in one of hers and squeeze it. When he turned to face her he saw she was smiling but it was a brittle smile, as if it was struggling to keep a cap on an out welling of emotion. When she spoke her voice was low and strained.

"I know it's been said before, Harry, but I'll say it again. You do your parents proud at every turn. If there is anything we can do to assist in this, you need only ask."

"Well, there is one thing. I don't have any way to contact her grandmother. Can the school help with that and find out how she's doing and what's the likelihood that Abigail is going to need help?"

"Of course, Harry. I'll see to it before the day is out. Will you be returning to London today?"

"I don't think so, Professor. If I haven't worn out my welcome, I'd like to stay a day or two to keep an eye on Abigail and in the mean time, I'll talk to Hagrid about the discussion we want to have with the Centaurs. Maybe Bill, I mean Professor Weasley and I can set up a little impromptu lecture or something. Since I'm not Disapparating for a while I better figure out how to make the most of my time where ever I am. May I borrow a couple of school owls? I need to send some messages."

"Of course, Harry. I'll have a student help you and save you the trek up to the owlry. I'm still concerned about your leg."

"Thanks, Professor."

As he said this he felt Abigail stir against his leg. He looked down and said,

“You waking up, little one?”

“Ummm, yes sir, sorry, I guess I was still kinda tired,” she said softly.

“No need to be sorry. You’ve been going on short sleep for quite some time. I think we should get you some lunch and then put you back to bed in the hospital ward. You can afford to miss this afternoon’s classes can’t you?”

“If I have to, sir. Um, today should be Potions and DADA. I think if you write me a note I should be ok,” she said with a little grin.

Harry and the Professor laughed. Harry helped Abigail back onto her feet and together they walked back up to the castle. It was a little while before lunch and the Headmistress left them to find Harry a helping hand while he and Abigail found some empty space amongst the students using the Great Hall for a study hall or recreation area.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Abigail?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Certainly?”

“Why?” she asked softly.

“Why what?”

“Why do you care so much about what happens to me?”

“I thought we’ve had this discussion before, Abigail.”

“We’ve talked about family and all that, but I know other students here that have families and they spend an awful lot of time complaining about their parents or brothers and sisters. I’ve seen

brothers or sisters here at school that don't talk to each other from one end of the week to the other," she said, looking up at him with those big eyes.

"Well, I think that's largely because they don't appreciate what they have. Then again, some people just don't get along with each other. But to answer your question, I care because we are so alike in some ways. I know what it's like to grow up alone. Even though I lived with my aunt and uncle and cousin, in most ways I was alone. I care because you're special, in a lot of ways. And I care because I care. I can't explain it much more than that. It's just the way I am."

She smiled up at him.

"I'm glad you're you, sir."

They ate lunch together, again at the end of the Ravenclaw table and then Harry asked Allison Binsworthy to escort Abigail back up to the hospital ward. A Gryffindor fifth year with the afternoon free came to Harry and told him he had been assigned as Harry's runner for the day. He brought with him parchment, ink and quill and Harry used the supplies to write to Hermione and Fleur. He sent the boy off to attach the messages to owls and tell them where to take them. He then had him come back and run a message down to Hagrid. About twenty minutes later the boy and Hagrid came back to the Great Hall.

"Hullo there, Harry. Ya alright there?"

"Yeah, Hagrid, I'm alright. My leg needs some healing still, hence my assistant there."

"Ah, Phillips here is a good 'un. Good man with a Hippogriff in fact, just like ya, Harry," Hagrid said.

Harry smiled as he saw the boy blush and puff up at the same time.

"Hagrid, if Hermione comes up tomorrow can you arrange for us to see the Centaurs?"

“I think so, Harry. Let me go talk ta ‘em. I’ll take Phillips here and send ‘em back when I know.”

“Great, thanks, Hagrid, that would be terrific.”

Harry watched the two move off, his friend towering over the student who was practically vibrating with excitement at the idea of meeting actual Centaurs. Another student approached Harry with a piece of parchment. It was from Bill Weasley, asking if he could meet with his NEWT students that evening for some discussion. Harry took up his quill and penned a quick affirmative message and sent it off with the student. He looked around the Great Hall and smiled. It was good to be back and good to be doing things again.

Harry's Future, Part 12

"Ok, now I have a question for you," Harry said, looking around at the Defense Against the Dark Arts NEWT candidates.

Harry had agreed to hold an impromptu session with Bill Weasley's most senior class seeing as he was staying over at Hogwarts and he had not been able to maintain their usual schedule of lectures due to his lengthy recuperation from his battle with the mutated Hungarian Horntail. He was in a pretty good mood this evening. Abigail had come down for dinner after another nap and she was looking healthier. She would never be someone described as robust but at least she had shaken the deathly pallor and most of the darkness under her eyes had faded. As he looked at the dozen or so students around him he smiled a little.

"Should you be afraid of me?" he asked.

All the students showed some degree of surprise and a couple looked shocked. Harry raised his eyebrows indicating he was waiting for a response.

"No sir, I don't think any of us are afraid of you," a Gryffindor witch replied.

"I didn't ask were you afraid, I asked should you be afraid of me," he said quietly.

"I don't understand, Mr. Potter, why should we be afraid of you?" a Hufflepuff wizard asked.

"Well, let's face it. I've managed to get involved in some pretty scary things since I came to Hogwarts. People around me have gotten hurt or worse. I'd been tightly linked to Voldemort all those years and not too long ago I managed to kill a dragon pretty much all by myself. Doesn't that make me someone to fear?" he said, leaning forward in his chair.

"Well, maybe put like that someone might think that but we know you, sir," the girl from Gryffindor said. "Everything you've ever done has

been for the good of the rest of us. I know it's not supposed to be well known but everyone in Gryffindor Tower knows that you were ready to let Voldemort kill you so that he'd be able to be destroyed. No, sir, I can't think of any reason to be afraid of you," she finished adamantly.

Harry smiled kindly and sat back in his chair. He looked around at the assembled students and saw them all nodding in agreement.

"I didn't ask you that question because I wanted to hear how much you liked me," he said with a laugh. "I asked it to make a point. Fear of the unknown is very common among humans, muggle or magical. It's one of the reasons we don't want muggles to know about us because they don't understand us and that makes them fearful and they do some very unpleasant things when they are afraid. The same can be true for magical folk. Just because you read a story, or hear someone talk about something, don't assume that's the whole truth. When dealing with the Dark Arts, ignorance, not knowing, generates fear and that leads to rash action and mistakes. As successful NEWT candidates you will be among the most knowledgeable members of the wizarding world but there will be much that you still don't know. Don't look at the conclusion of this year as the end of your journey, but the start. I understand that several of you made the cut during Patroller try outs. I'm looking forward to you joining the team, but you'll come to understand what I'm talking about better than most. I don't know where the rest of you may find yourselves but I hope you'll never stop learning. Well, I think that pretty much does it for tonight. I don't think I'll be back up this way before your tests so the best of luck to you."

Harry smiled as he slowly rose and shook hands with each of the students as they walked by to leave the classroom. He picked up his cane and was the last to leave the room. He wasn't thrilled with the idea of walking up all those stairs to the tower but there was no help for it so he took his time and made use of the cane as he went up each staircase. When he got to the common room there was a message for him from Hermione. She would be there tomorrow at eight o'clock and meet him from breakfast in the Great Hall.

Harry was a little surprised. He didn't expect an answer until tomorrow morning. He looked at the message again and saw that it

wasn't Hermione's handwriting. It looked more like Professor McGonagall's. Ah, Dumbledore. When Hermione got his owl she must have asked him to be her intermediary. Harry thought everyone could take a lesson in humility from the former Headmaster.

It was only around eight-thirty and he wanted to rest his leg before ascending to his room so he asked if anyone had a deck of Exploding Snap cards and soon found himself playing a number of hands with some of the sixth and seventh years. By ten o'clock he was feeling tired and his leg felt ready to make the long climb. He thanked the students for the game and they bade him good night. He made the climb at a measured, steady pace and by ten thirty he was in bed and asleep.

"Master Harry must wake up and start the day."

The familiar voice of Kreacher intruded on Harry's dreamless sleep. His eyes fluttered open and he looked at the end of the bed to see Kreacher, standing on the end of the mattress.

"Kreacher? What are you doing here?"

"Mistress Ginny sent a message to Kreacher saying that Master Harry would be staying at Hogwarts, possibly for several days. Kreacher came to do what Master Harry pays Kreacher to do."

"Thanks, Kreacher."

The little house elf hopped down off the bed and went and took Harry's cleaned and pressed clothes and laid them on the bed while Harry washed up.

"Say, Kreacher, did you ever have a chance to talk to the other house elves here to ask about what we talked about a while ago."

"Yes, Master Harry. No one here knows of any such thing as Master Harry asked. Kreacher is sorry."

"That's alright, Kreacher. Maybe with Hermione here we'll just talk to the Hogwarts house elves anyway," Harry said as he dressed.

“Kreacher will go and tell them that Master Harry would like to speak with them. This would please them Kreacher thinks.”

“Ok, Kreacher that would be great, thanks,” Harry said as he pulled on his robe and tried to neaten his hair a bit in the mirror.

He sighed and thought maybe if he just cut it all off it might grow back neater. Then he just shrugged and figured it wasn't that important really. He took up his cane and started his descent to the common room. He passed a number of students, or more to the point, they passed him, quickly as they zipped down the stairs as they headed for breakfast. Harry couldn't help but smile. In due time he made it to the Great Hall and he stood just inside the entrance to see if he could find Hermione. He saw her standing up on the faculty dais waving to him. He waved back and began walking down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw table. A little more then half way down he saw Abagail at her usual place amongst the other third year Ravenclaws.

“Mr. Potter,” she said excitedly but softly.

“Abagail,” Harry said happily. “How are you feeling this morning? You look much better then yesterday.”

“Yes, sir. I slept in my own bed last night and woke up feeling much better. I'm going to go to class and see how I do.”

“Ok, but don't overdo it, please,” Harry said.

“No, sir. I'll be careful,” she said breathlessly but with a large smile.

Harry noticed that the dark circles were nearly gone, but that she had several weeks of good eating ahead to put the weight back on her. He continued walking to the faculty dais and met Hermione at the steps.

“Harry, it's so good to see you, how are you doing?” she asked.

“Better every day, Hermione. Especially now that my little sister is back on her feet.”

“Professor McGonagall was telling me about that, Harry. That was a wonderful thing you did. You’re going to be a great dad.”

Harry just smiled and shrugged which caused Hermione to roll her eyes.

“Come join us, you two,” Professor McGonagall called to them. “You have a big day ahead of you.”

Harry and Hermione laughed and took their places at the table. Hagrid was only two spaces down and he looked over the head of the teacher next to him and said,

“Alright there, Harry, Hermione?”

“Alright, Hagrid,” Harry responded.

“Just great, Hagrid,” Hermione added. “Thanks for setting things up so quickly.”

“No worries, Hermione,” Hagrid said smiling under his bushy beard. “I think them Centaurs are actually kind of anxious to meet with ya. Once they agreed I think they wanted ta find out what you had ta say.”

Once breakfast was concluded Hagrid escorted Harry and Hermione out of the castle and down towards his hut. Hagrid was used to slowing his usual long legged gait when he had students in tow but with Harry’s weakened leg he had to slow down to an even more leisurely stroll. As they approached the hut they heard a dog barking but it didn’t sound like Fang. The barking was followed by the sight of a not yet full grown Brindled Mastiff. It had a huge head, long legs and paws the size of tea cup saucers but it’s body still had not finished growing which gave it that I’m-still-a-puppy look.

“Where’s Fang, Hagrid,” Harry asked but already dreading the likely answer.

"Ahh, sorry, Harry, but with ya laid up I didna think ta mention it. He slipped away in his sleep not ta long before ya had your tangle with that dragon. I miss him a lot but after all he were something like thirteen and that's pretty old for one of them biguns. This here is Norbie. I named him after ol' Norbert."

It didn't appear that Hagrid thought Harry might not want to be reminded about dragons.

"I'm sorry to hear about Fang. I hope Norbie turns out to be as good a dog for you."

"Thanks, Harry. Well, we do need ta go into the forest but just a bit. They know about ya being hurt and are willing ta come near the edge. That's a big deal for 'em."

"I appreciate that, Hagrid. Is it something I can mention?"

"Oh, aye, Harry, they'd think it polite and proper of ya."

They entered the forest with Norbie frolicking around them. They had only walked along the path for perhaps ten minutes when they came to a small clearing and there waiting for them were two Centaurs. Harry thought he recognized them but he waited until Hagrid made the introductions.

"Harry, Hermione, this is Bane and Ronan."

"Harry Potter, Serpent Slayer. It has been quite some time since last we have seen you."

"Hello Bane, Ronan. Yes it has. I thought I recognized you. I would like to thank you for consenting to come this close to the edge of the forest. Your consideration is very much appreciated," Harry said with a slight bow.

Bane nodded back to Harry and said,

“Hagrid came to us with your request for this meeting. It is well known to all that we Centaurs have no reason to treat with your Ministry but out of respect for the Serpent Slayer it was agreed that we would hear what you have to say.”

“I’m very grateful that you’ve honored our request. Hagrid may have told you that there have been many changes at the Ministry. Human relations with the other magical races has been moved from the Regulation of Magical Creatures Office and placed with the Office of Magical Law Enforcement. It is the Minister and Director’s desire to place the magical races on an even footing as far as the law is concerned.”

At this statement Bane and Ronan glanced at one another and then back to Harry.

“In order to begin this process, my very dear friend, Hermione Granger,” Harry indicated Hermione with his hand, “has been assigned as a special assistant to the Director. Hermione has been a very strong voice for equality for all the magical races. She wishes to speak with you today.”

“We are familiar with you, Hermione Granger. We are aware of your relationship with the Serpent Slayer. But know this. Our decision to speak to you is in deference to him. If he deems you a person worthy of trust we will respect his request. What would you say to us?”

Hermione had always been a bit intimidated by the Centaurs. The combination of size, stern visage and general contempt for humans was one she found a little frightening. She took a breath and step forward. Taking her cue from Harry she began,

“I understand your thoughts in this matter and please know that I respect them. I appreciate your coming to meet with us and I would also like to thank you for meeting us in this place to spare Harry a longer walk in the forest. As to what I would say to you it is simply this. I would like to know what you would wish of us.”

Bane and Ronan both frowned a bit and looked at each other, obviously confused. Ronan spoke next, his deep voice seeming to rumble directly from his chest.

“Human called Hermione, since it was you who asked for this meeting should not this be our question to you?”

“I’m afraid I may not have phrased that correctly,” Hermione replied. “How would you wish to treat with us as the Ministry and as fellow magic users?”

“You are asking us to set terms for our relationship with humans?” Ronan asked.

“That’s correct.”

Bane looked at Harry.

“Serpent Slayer, is this truly the purpose for which we are here?” the Centaur asked.

“It is, Bane. The same question has been posed to the Goblins and if we can find who to ask it will be posed to the house elves. As recent events have demonstrated, we humans have proven to be less than stellar custodians of all things magical,” Harry said with more than a touch of irony.

“If I was given to hasty thought and words, my response would be we wish you to leave us alone to live as we choose. But I am not hasty and we who look to the stars for guidance have seen the signs that a time for change has come. We will take your question to the others and we will ponder it and we will tell Hagrid when we are ready to speak again. Is this all you wish to discuss with us, Serpent Slayer?”

“Only one thing more, Bane. I know it created strife amongst your people but I wish to state my deepest appreciation for the assistance of the Centaurs at the final battle. I firmly believe that I stand here today in large part because of that timely intervention,” he said with a deeper bow. “I am pleased that we had this opportunity to speak with you this day.”

"I, too, appreciate your efforts on our behalf on that fateful day and wish to thank you for your time today," Hermione added.

"We will relate your request to the herd and we will relay your words of respect and appreciation as well. Fare-thee-well, Serpent Slayer and friend Hermione."

With a last nod to Hagrid the Centaurs turned and trotted down the path deeper into the darkness of the forest. Harry and Hermione turned to one another and let out long simultaneous breaths. Hagrid walked up to them and gently laid a huge hand on a shoulder of each.

"Well, I have ta say that went real well. Ya approached it just about perfectly. They are a proud bunch and ya gave 'em the respect they feel humans don't have for 'em. Hermione, did ya notice Bane called ya 'friend'? That's a big thing, ya impressed em ya did."

"Thanks, Hagrid. What was all that Serpent Slayer business, Hagrid? They always used to call him 'Harry Potter'," Hermione asked.

Hagrid turned them about on the path and started them walking out of the forest. Norbie was charging ahead snapping at any bug that flitted across his path.

"Well, that be a right interestin' story, Hermione. They knew about when Harry killed the Basilisk all them years ago. Then o' course Voldemort hisself was as much snake as human there at the end. Third times a charm with ya killin' that big beast up in Derbyshire, so now they think of ya as the Serpent Slayer. For 'em ta say so is a very big sign o' respect, Harry."

"I suppose the fact that on all three occasions I nearly got killed didn't seem to mean much to them," Harry said.

"Just the opposite, Harry. Let me tells ya summat about Centaurs. They may have the heads o' humans but there be an awful lot o' horse behind them eyes. They have a very strong herd mentality. One o' the things they really don't like about humans is what they see as selfishness. Always about the 'me' instead o' 'us'. But the fact that

you was willin' ta sacrifice yerself for others, well, that means a lot ta them. As long as yer behind this thing with the Ministry, Harry, they'll keep listenin'. Remember that Hermione. It's Harry's reputation that this thing hangs on. You have ta been completely on the straight with 'em. Otherwise Harry will suffer for it."

"I understand, Hagrid. I'd never do anything to betray Harry's trust," she said with a smile at Harry.

Harry was walking along deep in thought. He was wondering just how far reaching were the consequences of his actions and how much damage would occur if he messed up. He didn't say anything more as they walked up to the castle. Hagrid left them at the steps up to the front door as he had other tasks that morning and Harry and Hermione made their way to the Great Hall. While Harry took a seat at an empty area of the Gryffindor table and waited as Hermione went to the room behind the faculty dais to retrieve her bag. She wanted to make notes on what had been discussed with the Centaurs while it was still fresh. When she returned she found Harry seated at the table, his hands folded on the tabletop and his eyes a bit unfocused.

"Harry? Are you alright?" she asked.

"Hmm, oh, I was just thinking is all, Hermione," he replied.

"What's bothering you, Harry?" she asked as she sat across from him. "I think we did pretty well this morning, all things considered."

"Oh, I think so, too. I guess I was just thinking about what Hagrid said about the Centaurs and what they thought about me. I'm a little worried about it, that's all."

"Why, Harry? I think it's a great honor for you to have them feel you are someone they can trust, probably the only one."

"That's just it, Hermione. I'm the only one that the Centaurs trust. I'm the only one that the Ministry thinks can fix the Aurors and by the way the whole place as far as the magical community is concerned. I'm the only one that Abigail could open up to. Why am I at the center of all this. What's so special about me? And what if something happens

to me? Does it all fall apart? I'm only twenty years old, Hermione. I'm practically still a kid."

Hermione looked at Harry carefully. This didn't appear to be the kind of mood that plunged him into such deep despondency before. It looked more like he was feeling the weight of responsibility pressing down on him and he was starting to panic a bit.

"Harry, try to relax a little bit. I understand that you've taken on a lot of responsibility for someone your age, but hasn't that always been the case? You took on saving the Sorcerer's Stone when you were eleven. You and Ron went into the Chamber of Secrets and you defeated the shade of Riddle and killed a Basilisk to save Ginny when you were twelve. You led the DA and let's not forget that whole horrible business of our trekking about hunting down the Horcruxs. Harry, you've been taking on responsibility far beyond your age practically your whole life and look at what you've accomplished. Why does this seem so different?" she asked.

"I don't know, Hermione. Maybe it's because I've had time to think about it too much. Maybe it's because I see things getting better and I think if I mess it up we'll slide back down to the dark days again. Maybe it's because I look in the mirror every morning and I see a messy haired kid that hardly needs to shave and I think what the heck are you doing in charge?" he said with a snort.

"Harry, Alexander the Great was twenty when he became a king, you know."

Harry laughed and said,

"Hermione, I hardly think I'm in the same league as Alexander the Great, for crying out loud. Besides didn't he die when he was like thirty three or something? And when he did the whole thing fell apart?"

"Yes, Harry, that's true. He got sick and died and he didn't leave anyone to take over for him and that started a lot of infighting and his empire broke up. So if you're afraid that something might happen make sure you have people who can carry on for you. But haven't

you already started that? Didn't you appoint Maxwell your deputy? I'm the one that is supposed to be dealing with the magical races so as long as I don't mess up I'll be handling most of that. And Abigail would have Ginny. It's ok, Harry. You aren't in this alone. Good grief, what happened to mister team work and family? Why is it that you think you're in this alone?"

Hermione was leaning over the table with her hands atop Harry's, her eyes fixed on his.

"Hmm, probably because I'm such a prat," he said with a smirk. "Or maybe I've banged my head one time too many. Ok, Hermione. What do you say we start working on your notes?"

"I'll say ok if you really, truly feel better and you're not trying to just shine me on."

"No, Hermione. I'm not messing you about. I know you're right, I just get a little overwhelmed at times I guess."

"Ok then," she said as she opened a notebook and they began to go over what was said and what their impressions were of the Centaurs response. Hermione then filled Harry in on what had been discussed with the Goblins and how they too felt that Harry was someone they could trust and by extension they were willing to hear Hermione out. There were no commitments made other than to take the issue up within the Goblin community and respond at some later date.

"I have to tell you, Harry. As much as the Centaurs were impressed by what you did about Voldemort and all, the Goblins were just as impressed by your business dealings. I'm wondering if your relationship with Dobby and Kreacher will have a similar impact with the house elves once we get to talk to them."

Harry just shrugged; he was to the point where he just didn't know how to respond to such statements anymore. Hermione gave him a 'look' and then just shook her head. The Prefects had invited Harry and Hermione to sit at the very end of the senior section of the Gryffindor table so they took the opportunity to move down from where they had been working. They answered a few greetings in

passing and in one instance Harry replied in the affirmative when a fifth year witch asked if he might be able to get her an autograph from Ginny.

"Has that happened a lot, Harry? The autograph thing, I mean?"

"Oh, yes. A number of times in fact. It seems our Ginny is getting to be quite the sports celebrity," Harry said with a proud smile.

"How long does she plan to continue to play?"

"Oh, I guess she didn't tell you. I would have thought she had. She's nearing the end of her two year contract. They picked up her one year option and then she's going to retire. So that puts it around the middle of summer after this one coming up. She's likely to become the Quidditch reporter for the Prophet."

"Really?" Hermione said, genuinely surprised. "Imagine that. After all they used to do to make your life miserable. Poetic justice in a way."

"Yeah, but only if they pay her well."

They took their seats at the end of the table and in a few moments students began streaming in for lunch. In a few moments Abigail came in and when she saw Harry and Hermione her face lit up and she hurried to the edge of the table.

"Hello, sir, Hermione."

"Hello Abigail, how are you feeling," Harry asked.

"Ok, sir. A little tired but I'm good. Guess I'll just go to sleep early tonight. How much longer will you be here, sir," she asked in her airy voice.

"The way it looks now, I may be leaving tomorrow, the next day at the latest," Harry replied.

"Ok, sir. I'll see you later then, gotta go get to my seat," she said and then hurried off.

“Gee, Harry, she looks so thin,” Hermione said.

“You have no idea how much worse she looked a couple of days ago. Very, very scary,” Harry said quietly.

Any further discussion was cut off by the arrival of the Prefects who sat next to Harry and Hermione. The meal passed pleasantly with topics ranging from Quidditch to the changes ongoing in the Ministry. It turned out that both Prefects were being heavily recruited by various departments. At one point Hermione and the young witch sitting beside her had their heads close in a whispered conversation that resulted in Hermione slipping a piece of parchment to the girl with a bit of writing on it. When Hermione looked up she saw Harry watching her with raised eyebrows. She just gave him a little satisfied smile. As the time for lunch was drawing to a close a Gryffindor first year hurried up to Harry carrying a folded piece of parchment.

“Mr. Potter, sir. Excuse me, sir, but Professor McGonagall told me to give this to you, sir and wait for your answer, sir.”

Harry had to smile at the number of ‘sirs’ that had been worked into that rush of words. Harry took the parchment and broke the seal and read the message. His expression went stony and when he was done he asked Hermione if he could borrow her quill and ink. When she produced them Harry scribbled a quick reply and handed it to the boy. Before Harry could thank him, the little wizard-in-training hurried back the way he came.

“Is everything alright, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“The Professor wants to talk to me after lunch. Why don’t you hang around and when I’m done we’ll see if we can talk to the house elves.”

“Ok, Harry.”

Harry got up and started walking down the aisle towards the faculty dais. He didn’t want to try and negotiate the crush of students leaving so he figured he’d start early rather than make the Headmistress wait

for him after the Hall cleared out. As he passed where the first year messenger sat he gave him a pat on the shoulder and thanked him for running the messages. He stammered out a 'you're welcome' and Harry moved on, not seeing the wide eyed looks of the other Gryffindor first years. He moved off to the side of the dais as the Headmistress dismissed the students to their afternoon classes. She came around the table and gave Harry a nod and then went through the door to the private room behind the table. Harry climbed the steps and after exchanging a few 'hellos' with some of the faculty he followed the Headmistress.

"Close the door and have a seat by the fireplace, Harry," she said.

Harry did as she instructed and came to sit in one of the large cushioned chairs arranged before the now cold fireplace.

"It's as bad as we feared, Harry. I've had word this morning that Abigail's grandfather is suffering from severe dementia. That's why he's been placed in a muggle care facility."

"Um, is there something we can do about that? I mean with magic, St. Mungo's?"

"I'm afraid not, Harry. Even if it didn't go against just about every law in our books, I've been assured that it's as much a problem for us within the magical community and we are no better equipped to cure it then muggles are. But that's not all. Her grandmother is in fairly poor shape herself. She still lives at home but requires regular assistance with her housework and looking after herself. It seems the poor dear is just about worn out. Losing her only daughter, caring for an ailing husband and then Abigail. Her being at school has been a bit of a mixed blessing. While not having to look after her she misses not having whatever help that little girl was able to give. Mrs. Williams, that's her name, is aware of you, Harry. Apparently Abigail has told her a great deal about you and she is most appreciative of what you've done for her these past three years and is agreeable to have you become her legal guardian if that is what you had in mind."

"It is," Harry replied quietly.

“Well then, I will let her know that is your intent and the arrangements will be made. This is a wonderful thing you’re doing, Harry.”

“Maybe. I just can’t help thinking what would have happened if a certain orphan, or I guess cast off would be more accurate, had had someone to look after him. The world would have been a different place I think.”

Harry sat staring into the cold fireplace for a few moments. The Headmistress looked at him and a thought occurred to her.

“It bothers you, doesn’t it, Harry? I’m referring to Voldemort.”

“That I had to kill him? Yes, it does. It all seems such a waste. The death and destruction, the fear. Our fear of him, his fear of dying. Did you know, Professor, that there are people out there that are afraid of me?”

“What are you talking about, Harry? Who could possibly be afraid of you?” she asked incredulously.

“A couple of weeks ago I had a meeting with the trainers for the Patrollers at the Black house in London. After we were done I took them all to lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, sort of to say thanks for pressing on while I was laid up. Hannah Abbott walked with me through the tap room to our table and I noticed that some of the people looking at me appeared frightened. She later told me that with every thing that has happened, especially after the dragon thing, that some people are afraid of me. I noticed the same looks on some people at the Three Broomsticks the other night, too.”

Harry was staring back at the fireplace. The Headmistress looked at him and then leaned forward.

“Harry. You can’t let what other people think about you matter so much. You possess a great deal of power which has been demonstrated in several spectacular episodes. And as a result, those episodes have been widely publicized and that’s all that most people have to judge you by, fairly or unfairly. Power frightens people who don’t have it, Harry. Whether it is magical power or governing power

or policing power. At this point, you possess all three and in fairly large quantities. Those of us who know you so well know better, but I'm afraid you'll simply have to learn to deal with it and steel yourself. It's a lesson I had to learn quite a while ago."

"What do you mean, Professor?"

"Oh, come now, Harry. Think back just a little while ago. When you first saw me what was your first impression?" she asked with a bit of a twinkle in her eye.

Harry thought back. The first time was right after the boat ride across the lake and before the Sorting ceremony. He remembered her as the stern, imposing witch explaining the basic rules of life at Hogwarts.

"You were kind of scary."

"And when you and Mr. Weasley showed up for my first class, late."

"Um, still kind of scary."

"Exactly, Mr. Potter," she said in her best stern voice which then softened as she smiled.

"Year after year I welcomed first years who looked at me with that frightened fidgety expression and I knew most would outgrow it, but some never would. Now I may not have had the same impact as the late Professor Snape but I know the impression I made, but it was what was needed to get the job done. The same holds true for you, Harry. You have the potential to make a huge impact on our world, far greater than Voldemort because yours will be for the good and hopefully much longer lasting. But you'll have to understand and come to terms with the fact that some people won't like you and others will fear you but in the end what you do will benefit them as well. It may not be fair but it is the way it is."

She had taken a hold of his forearm with one hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Thanks, Professor. I guess it just gets a little confusing at times. Sorry to be a bother to you."

Professor McGonagall snorted.

"I believe we've had that discussion before, young man and you are no bother. Now get yourself out there and keep doing what you're doing. Except for banging yourself up at regular intervals. That I think you should endeavor to avoid whenever possible."

"Yes, ma'am. I think that would be a good idea."

The Headmistress smiled at him as they stood up and walked back out to the Great Hall together. Hermione had moved to the near end of the Gryffindor table and was waiting for Harry. He smiled down at her a bit and after taking his leave of the Professor he went to join her.

"Everything ok, Harry?"

"Yes and no," Harry began. "Abigail's grandparents are in no condition to look after her so we're going to work it out that I become her legal guardian. That's one of the reasons she's doing better now, she was so worried about being orphaned again but I told her we wouldn't let that happen, Ginny and I. And the Professor and I talked some more about things and she's managed to get my head straightened out, at least a little bit better so yeah, we're doing ok."

Hermione just nodded and smiled at Harry.

"Ok, well, we've got the Goblins and Centaurs thinking. Now how do we bring the house elves into the process? Kreacher wasn't able to come up with anything for us, Harry?"

"No, there really doesn't seem to be any kind of, I don't know, center of gravity I guess you'd say for their race. They seem to be such an extension of the human world they have no separate identity. The staff here at Hogwarts is probably the single largest concentration of house elves anywhere. It's a place to start," Harry said with a shrug.

"Can Kreacher get us in to see them?"

"I can ask," he said. "Kreacher, I need to speak to you, please," he called out.

With a pop the house elf was standing besides Harry.

"How may Kreacher be of service, Master Harry?"

"Kreacher, Hermione Granger and I would like to speak to the house elves here at Hogwarts. Can you ask them for us?"

"Yes, Master Harry. I will do so now," he said and popped out of sight.

In less than five minutes Kreacher popped back into view.

"The house elves would be most pleased to speak to Master Harry. They are less happy to speak with Hermione Granger. Many remember how she used to leave socks about for house elves to pick up."

Hermione turned bright red at being reminded of her guerilla tactics early in her elven rights campaign.

"Thanks, Kreacher. Would you like to come with us? We have to take the other way to the kitchen."

"Kreacher will meet Master Harry at the entrance as is proper," the little elf said and then he popped out of view again.

Harry and Hermione walked towards the exit of the Great Hall and out into the corridor. They approached the main staircase and found the door that led to the corridor where the painting of the bowl of fruit hung. Harry tickled the pear and just as it giggled and turned into a door handle, the handle turned and the painting swung open to reveal Kreacher pushing the 'door' and bowing Harry and Hermione into the kitchen.

Although Harry had been here before he couldn't help but marvel at how the kitchen mirrored the dining hall above. The same long tables arranged with plates and cups and flatware. The big difference was

the multitude of house elves instead of students. Dozens and dozens of pairs of large liquid eyes were looking at them. Several came up to him and one said,

“Harry Potter is very welcome and pleased we all are to see him. What may we do to assist the great Harry Potter?”

“My very good friend Hermione Granger would like to talk to you and ask you a question.” Harry replied.

“The house elves remember Hermione Granger,” the elf said eyeing her warily. “There are no socks, are there?”

“No,” Hermione said fervently. “I don’t have socks or hats or any clothes at all. I was wrong then and that is not why I am here today. I simply would like to ask you a question.”

“Hermione, maybe we should explain to them a bit of what you’re trying to do,” Harry suggested.

“I think you might be right, Harry,” she replied.

Looking at the assembling house elves Hermione took a deep breath and began. She told them about how things at the Ministry were changing and how the four magical races were being put under the same legal standing. As Harry watched he could see that the house elves were not fully comprehending what she was saying. A house elf was not generally aware of the greater world around them and the idea of laws beyond not being allowed to use a wand was murky at best. When Hermione stopped Harry could see most of them just staring at her, blinking politely but with out much understanding.

“What my friend Hermione is trying to tell you is that the Ministry would like to know how the house elves would like to live. We’ve asked the Centaurs and the Goblins and they are considering the idea. Now we are asking you.”

“This is a strange thing to ask house elves. House elves have always lived as they live now. Working for those that live in the houses that house elves work in. What else would a house elf want to do?”

"We don't know. That is why we've come to ask you. Dobby lived as a free house elf and Kreacher does as well. He still works for me but he does so because he chooses to and he accepts payment for his services. The opportunity could be open to you," Harry explained.

Some of the house elves began to get agitated. They looked at each other and muttered.

"Master Harry, if Kreacher may, Kreacher would like to say something."

"Of course, Kreacher," Harry said.

"It is easy for Hogwarts house elves to be angry when Master Harry talks about change," Kreacher began. "Hogwarts house elves do not know what it is like to work for Masters or Mistresses who treat their house elves badly. Kreacher knows what that is like. Dobby knew what that was like. Master Harry freed Dobby. Master Harry gave Kreacher the choice. Hermione Granger was the one who wanted Kreacher to be treated with kindness and Kreacher liked that much better than the old way. Kreacher still works for Master Harry but it is Kreacher's choice. Hogwarts house elves should not get angry with Master Harry for asking the question. Master Harry does not say, 'house elves must go free', Master Harry asks what do house elves want. House elves make the choice, not have it made for them. Hogwarts house elves may not want to leave Hogwarts or ask Hogwarts for money. Maybe other house elves do not like how they are treated and would like it to be different. Maybe that choice should be theirs to make."

Harry was staring at Kreacher. He had never heard him say so much at one time and he never heard him speaking so forcefully. The other house elves were likewise shocked and many were staring at Kreacher in amazement. The elf that had been first to speak did so again.

"Hogwarts house elves did not mean to be angry with Harry Potter. House elves like it here at Hogwarts and would not like to leave but they can not speak for all other house elves. They do not know what

others want. Hogwarts house elves thank Harry Potter for speaking here today. They thank Hermione Granger for not bringing sneaky clothes today. They must return to work.”

With that the house elves turned around to return to their tasks. Harry and Hermione looked at each other and Harry said,

“Well, we tried. This one might take a lot more effort,” he said.

“Looks that way, Harry, but at least it was a start,” she said then looked down at Kreacher.

“Thank you for helping us today, Kreacher. That was a wonderful thing you said to them.”

“Kreacher has been fortunate to have come to work for Master Harry, but Kreacher remembers that it was Hermione Granger that convinced Master Harry that Kreacher should be treated kindly,” the last being said with the wide smile of the house elf.

Harry and Hermione smiled back and then left the kitchen. As they returned to the main entrance hall Hermione turned to Harry.

“I think that’s all I’m going to get accomplished here, Harry, so I might as well head back to the office. When are you coming back?”

“I think I’ll leave in the morning. I can get a ride back to Glasgow and then catch the train to London so I’ll be back in the office the day after. I want to make sure Abigail is set and explain to her what we have in mind. Thanks for coming up on such short notice. It was good to get that taken care of.”

“I’m glad we could do it, Harry. Thanks for thinking of it, on top of everything else you have to deal with,” Hermione said and she gave Harry a hug.

Harry watched her walk out the main door and then thought about what he should do next when an idea occurred to him. He walked into the Great Hall and made his way into the room behind the dais. He

took a seat before the fire place and then called for Kreacher. With a pop the little elf was there before him.

“How may Kreacher be of service, Master Harry?”

“Kreacher, would you please go to my room in the Gryffindor tower and get the warming bag that Madame Pomfrey gave me? I have some time and my leg is feeling a bit stiff.”

“At once, Master Harry.”

Harry sat back and stretched out the sore leg. A moment later Kreacher popped back into the room with the bag in hand. As Harry placed the bag on his knee Kreacher went to the wood bin and removed several pieces and placed them in the fireplace. With a wave of his hand the wood burst into flame and Harry could feel the warmth on his face. He settled back into the chair and closed his eyes.

“Ah, this is great Kreacher, thank you, my friend,” Harry murmured.

Kreacher looked at Harry with an odd expression and replied,

“Master Harry is most welcome,” and he popped out of sight.

As the warmth from the bag on his leg spread and the temperature in the room rose from the fire Harry found himself drifting off. It wasn't a deep sleep like he had the night before but more of a comfortable doze. The blackness behind his eyes began to lighten and random images emerged and then faded from view. A voice began to intrude on his awareness.

“Sir?”

“Who is that?” Harry's voice echoed in his mind.

“It's me, sir, Abigail.”

A slightly blurry image of the little girl floated among the gray background.

“Abigail, why aren’t you in class?” Harry asked.

“I think I am, sir. I’m asleep. I’m in History of Magic and I sometimes get drowsy in this class.”

“Yes, I used to do that same thing,” Harry said with a little laugh. “Wait a minute. If we’re both asleep how can we be talking to each other?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’ve never done this before. It’s kind of neat though,” she said with a girlish giggle.

“Yes, it is. But I think you need to wake up and pay attention. You don’t want your grades to slip,” Harry said like a true Professor.

“It’s ok, sir. I know this stuff already. I read it in some books I got last year,” she replied matter-of-factly.

“Well, as a favor to me, try and wake up. I know Professor Binn is a tough one but it’s good practice. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Ok, sir. I’ll try. See you then,” she said as her image faded.

Harry’s subconscious began to process what had just occurred while other indistinct images swam in and out of focus. A familiar one began to coalesce and again he thought he heard a voice, a disturbingly familiar voice. As the image became clear Harry was ‘looking’ into the same green eyes he saw in his mirror each morning.

“Mum,” Harry sobbed.

“Look after Abigail. She is more precious than you know. We love you,” he heard her say as her image dissolved and was replaced by the image of himself, almost.

“We’re proud of you, son. All of us,” James said as he too faded from view.

“Dad,” Harry whispered, his hands involuntarily reaching out in his sleep.

Had anyone been there watching they would have seen tears streaming down the cheeks of the young man asleep before the fireplace. One part of his mind was trying to wake him while another sought to remain in that place desperate to recall the images of his mother and father. He was finally pulled out of that place by an incessant tugging on his arm and whispered words in his ear.

“Sir. Sir. Wake up. Wake up.”

Harry’s eyes fluttered open behind his glasses still full of tears. Barely in focus, he saw the wide eyes and still too hollow cheeks of Abigail pleading with him to wake up. The disappointment at having had only the briefest of contacts with his mother and father, added to stress of the past weeks broke through the last of his emotional barriers and he began to cry like a brokenhearted child. As he bent forward in his grief, the young girl who had only days before undergone the same catharsis wrapped her arms around his shoulders and put her cheek against the top of his head trying to lend to him the same support he had given her. After a few moments she lifted her head and focused on a spot somewhere beyond the chair in which Harry sat and nodded, then said,

“Yes, ma’am. We’ll look after each other.”

Harry's Future, Part XIII

Professor McGonagall anxiously stood outside the door that led to the antechamber behind the faculty table. The heart wrenching sounds that she had heard when she first hurried up onto the dais had subsided and now she could just barely hear murmured conversation and the pop of a house elf entering the room. Whatever it was that caused Abigail to flee from her History of Magic Class and run straight here was coming to a close and the Headmistress would wait until she emerged. She had her suspicions, or more precisely, her fears about who the little witch had come running to but would have to wait on that as well.

The Headmistress stepped away from the door and sat down on one of the chairs at the head table. She nervously drummed her fingers on the armrest of the chair and watched the door. She waited for a quarter of an hour before the door was slowly pulled open and Harry and Abigail emerged, her two tiny hands holding on to his left, his right holding the cane that helped support him.

"Hello, Professor. Sorry if I caused any trouble," Harry said.

"Is there something you'd like to talk about, Harry?" she asked evenly.

"I think so, Professor, but I think perhaps we should include Professor Dumbledore," Harry replied. "This gets a little complicated."

"Very well, Harry, let's all walk up to my office," the Headmistress replied.

Fortunately for Harry's current state of mind most of the students were still in classes and those few that were in the Great Hall were ignoring or pretending to ignore the trio on the faculty dais. They left the Great Hall by the smaller side door and began the trek to the Head's office. By the time they had reached the guardian statue the stiffness had returned to Harry's leg but it was only a minor sensation on the edges of his awareness.

He was all too aware of the two small hands that were holding on to his left. He was all too aware of the memory of the bright green eyes

that had held him so firmly and the charge to care for Abigail. And he was all too aware of the bitter disappointment that welled up inside after the images of his mother and father faded away all too soon. He heard Professor McGonagall say the password and he heard the grinding sound of the statue swinging out of the way. He followed the Professor up the staircase with Abigail pressed closely to his side so they could both make it up the narrow spiral staircase. When they entered the Heads office proper a chorus of greetings sounded out from the portraits but were quickly stifled when they could see that something was amiss. It was Dumbledore who broke the ensuing silence.

"Good afternoon, Harry, Abigail. I feel I would not be incorrect in making the observation that all is not well with you," the former Headmaster said.

Harry looked up at his mentor, no less so even in death, and nodded slightly.

"Something odd happened a little while ago, Professor, and it kind of took me by surprise. It was something I thought you should know about, sir. I can't figure it out."

"By all means, my boy. Myself, all of us here, are more than willing to be of assistance, well those of us who are awake, that is," the Professor said as gentle snores drifted down from several directions. "Please tell us what this is all about, in your own time, of course."

Professor McGonagall took her place behind the desk. Harry walked Abigail over to a chair and lifted her onto it. He gave her a smile to reassure her and then he walked over to the portrait of Dumbledore and began to describe what happened. Dumbledore maintained his calm gaze upon Harry's face although his eyes did flicker once to Abigail and then again to Professor McGonagall when Harry mentioned Lily's bright green eyes. Harry concluded his retelling minus the breakdown.

No one said a word for several long minutes. Finally Dumbledore looked at the three people in front of him, his expression serious. He focused on Harry once more and said,

“Suffice to say, Harry, this is a most extraordinary occurrence. Taken by itself the conversation between yourself and Abigail would be incredible. The addition of the appearance of your parents and your mother’s instructions to you regarding Abigail are nothing short of astounding.”

“It goes a little further then that, sir,” Harry said as he turned to Abigail. “I’m guessing you didn’t get a chance to tell them about the first time, did you?”

Abigail shook her head. Harry then turned back toward Dumbledore and began to tell the tale of his time in coma. When he started to tell about his first encounter, with him, Harry stopped.

“Sir, do you recall any of this, were you actually there?” Harry asked.

“Things are not quite so straightforward on this side, my boy. I have certain memories, images of both of our encounters but I think for the sake of the others and for clarity, assume I have no recollection and tell us the full story.”

Harry nodded and told in as much detail as he could recall what had happened during his visits to the ‘other side’. When he was done he could hear mutters and murmurs from various places on the wall. He looked at Professor McGonagall, whose face was a study in forced neutrality, trying not to give anything away.

Once again it was Dumbledore that spoke first.

“I think I’m safe in saying that this is the most incredible tale I have ever heard in life or death. There are things going on here that defy belief and coming from a wizard that is saying something. Abigail, my dear, if you would please,” Dumbledore said as he waved her over.

She slid off the chair and shyly came to stand at Harry’s side. Apparently without noticing it, Harry placed his arm around her shoulder.

“Miss Westwood,” the Professor said kindly. “Is there anything you can add to what Harry has said? This goes well beyond any of the things we’ve talked about these past few years.”

“Well, sir. He didn’t tell you how I was told that he needed help the first time,” she replied and began telling how she was enlisted by the shade of Lily Potter to come to Harry’s aid.

Once more Dumbledore listened in silence. When Abigail was through, he looked down on both she and Harry from his portrait, his hands clasped and hidden within the sleeves of his robe.

“That there is some connection between you two is without question. What that connection is I haven’t the faintest idea. It is true that you both lost your parents to tragic circumstances but beyond that I just don’t know. I believe we must make a more intensive search for the details of Ms. Westwood’s ancestry.”

“I wonder if there might be something in the Ministry records that might help, Professor,” Harry offered.

“It’s a place to start, Harry.”

“Well,” Harry spoke to the room, “you all know what’s been going on. If any one has any ideas as to what has been happening I’d be happy to hear them. I’m at a complete loss.”

“Well, young man,” began an elderly witch from the opposite side of the room. “I’ve been hanging on this wall for some two hundred and fifty years and I’ve heard quite a lot said about you and all that business with that scoundrel Riddle. Seems to me there’s been a great deal about death and the boundaries between the living and the dead. Riddle trying to forestall his and him trying to hurry you towards your own. You’ve survived not one but two killing curses I understand. Seems to me that perhaps the boundary has been thinned a bit where you’re concerned. And as for this young lady it doesn’t sound like boundaries apply to her at all. It’s something to think about, at least.”

Harry looked at the portrait that was addressing him and the aged visage that was regarding him, her light blue eyes squinting to see him over the tops of her half glasses.

“Perhaps you’re right, ma’am. I don’t really know and I’m a little too fuzzy headed to try and figure it out now. It must be nearly dinner time. I’ll walk Abigail back down to the Great Hall and then I think I take a little walk outside and try to clear my head. Good night, Professors. Good night, everyone.”

Harry offered his hand to Abigail and again she took it in both of hers and they turned and walked towards the stairway. The current and past heads watched them go. Once they heard the statue grind back into place a spirited conversation ensued. The subjects of that conversation moved slowly down the corridor to the staircases and navigated down the shifting stairs to the main floor.

“Abigail, before you go in to eat there’s a couple of things I’d like to tell you,” he said looking down at her.

“Yes, sir?” she said in a barely audible whisper, her eyes wide and bright as they looked up at his face.

“Firstly, thank you for coming to see me this afternoon. I appreciate your concern. Secondly, Professor McGonagall told me what she had found out about how your grandparents are doing and it confirms what you told me the other day. Your grandmother has agreed to let me become your guardian. At the end of term you’ll be coming to live with me this summer. Of course Ginny will be there quite a bit, too.”

“Really, sir?”

“Yes, really. It seems we are linked at least for the foreseeable future,” he said with a bit of a smile.

Abigail’s smile was a good deal larger. She squeezed Harry’s hand and then put her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly.

“Thank you, sir,” she said from around his chest. “Thank you.”

"You're welcome, little one. Now, go on inside and have a good dinner. I'll be leaving in the morning but I'll see you at breakfast, ok?"

"Yes, sir," she said with one last squeeze then she let go and practically skipped into the Hall.

Harry watched her go and then he slowly made his way out into the dimming evening. He made his way to the same bench that he and Abigail had previously sat on. He looked around the grounds and then up into the sky which was still too bright to show any stars. As he tilted his head back and let his eyes roam the heavens, a voice startled him.

"If you seek guidance in stars, Harry Potter, you have a long while to wait."

Harry's head snapped down and around.

"Firenze, bloody hell, you scared me," Harry exclaimed.

"My apologies, Harry Potter, I did not mean to cause you alarm. Hagrid came to inform me of your contact with my brethren. I heard you speaking to the little witch and I sought you out," the Centaur said.

"It's ok, Firenze. I just wasn't expecting anyone to be out here. It's good to see you again. It's been a while," Harry said.

The Centaur folded his legs and reclined on the grass beside the bench so that he could look at Harry from a less towering perspective. He looked at Harry with a calm steady gaze as Harry looked back at the Centaur who had rescued him from the combined Quirrel/Voldemort creature his first year. The Centaur spoke again saying,

"I am likewise pleased to speak with you again, Harry Potter. As to the time, it has been a short while by the stars but one full of momentous events and portents. You have fulfilled much that was foretold but there is much left ahead for you to do," Firenze said gravely.

"I've been told that a couple of times lately. Hearing it from you makes it sound pretty final though. Hard to argue with the stars," Harry said ruefully.

"Do not fall into the same trap that so many humans do when they look to the stars for guidance, Harry Potter. The stars do not dictate the course of events any more than does a sign along the side of a pathway. They merely point the way for those that know how to read them. Who or what sets the course of that pathway is still one of the great mysteries of our collective existence that we have not been able to penetrate," Firenze said, the deep voice ominous in the dimming light.

"Well, whoever was responsible for my path sure was working extra hours. I suppose the stars haven't told you that I get to live a long quiet life filled with family and friends have they?" Harry asked.

"I am afraid we Centaurs do not draw such exacting messages from the night sky, Harry Potter," Firenze said with a touch of irony in his voice. "You would do well to chart your own course through the years to come. You may have to steer your way amongst a few obstacles but the way will be your own."

Harry let out a long sigh and looked back up into the sky. The sun had dipped below the horizon but a few high clouds still reflected back the red rays and the view was truly breath taking. In the past few years he had heard a variety of people tell him for a variety of reasons that the answers had to come from within himself. Even the all powerful stars weren't going to take any of the weight of his shoulders. He laughed quietly and then looked over at Firenze, meeting his penetrating gaze.

"The master of my own destiny then. Alright, Firenze. But if you happen to spot an obstacle or two up there in the night sky feel free to send me a message. Hagrid can always pass it on," Harry said with a small laugh.

"I will do my best, Harry Potter. I will take my leave of you now. It was my intention to renew our acquaintance and wish you well. Farewell."

Firenze rose from the grass and went back along the path to the castle. Harry spent a few more minutes gazing into the sky until the red tinged clouds faded away. Then he slowly pulled himself off the bench and made his way up the steps and up into the entrance hall. He could hear the sound of the students nearing the end of dinner as he started climbing the shifting staircases to the Gryffindor Tower. He had a long day of travel ahead of him.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. I got your message,” Milligan said as he entered the study of the Black house. Harry had returned from Hogwarts last evening and sent a message to the Ministry this morning asking Milligan to come to meet him.

“Thanks for coming out, Milligan. I have something I need you to look into. You remember what I told you about the source of the information that we used to take down those smugglers?”

“Yes, sir. I remember that you told me very little and that I should trust the information,” the lanky investigator said with a straight face.

“That’s right,” Harry said with a small grin. “Well, now I’m going to tell you everything I know about my source. She’s a thirteen year old girl that has the uncanny ability to ‘see’ things that happen as they are occurring. She can also pick up on events that have happened and trace them backwards. What else she can do we can only guess at. She comes from a muggle family so we don’t know what the source of her talent is. That’s what we want to find out.”

He handed Milligan an envelope saying,

“This is all we’ve been able to come up with so far, but it’s a start. This is your top priority for now and I mean just you. Consider this a confidential investigation. The rest of your team can continue on with the smugglers and that dragon.”

“Yes, sir. If that’s the way you want it. I have some contacts on the muggle side that might be of help. This will likely take a while.”

“I’m afraid you’re right but give it your best effort. I may be wrong but I think what we have here is a once in a lifetime occurrence. That’s all I have for you, Milligan.”

“Yes, sir,” the lanky wizard replied as he stood up and left the study.

Harry leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling for a few moments. In the last several days he had managed to make some headway into what he felt was a logjam created by his injuries. If truth be told things weren’t that bad. The reorganization tasks he had started were continuing. Evelyn Muntab had been training her Special Squad relentlessly. The Patroller trainees were busy working the Alleys and Hogsmeade. The incorporation of all the magical law offices had taken place and Harry’s title as Auror chief was now a misnomer. It would be more accurate to say he was the Chief of Magical Law Enforcement. But from his vantage point it appeared that he had much to do and he was lagging behind. He leaned forward and took a sheet of parchment and began making notes about what he saw as important tasks and how he could get them done. He heard the knocking on his front door and when Kreacher answered it he heard a deep familiar voice ask if Harry was available. Kreacher’s higher voice answered in the affirmative and by the time Harry was standing up the imposing figure of Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared in the doorway of his study.

“Minister,” Harry began.

“No, no, Harry, sit back down and take the weight off that leg. I wanted to see how you were doing and to have a talk. Could I impose on you for some tea?”

“Of course, sir. Kreacher, could you fix tea for us, please?”

“Certainly, Master Harry,” the little elf said and left the room.

“Please sit down, sir.”

“Thank you, Harry. I have to say this house is certainly a much more pleasant place than the last time I was here. The change in your house elf is nothing short of amazing,” the Minister said.

"Yes, sir. Hermione's theory about treating him with kindness was right on the money. I understand the report that got her the job with Director Grimsson contained some references to Kreacher's turn around," Harry said.

"More than some, Harry. I read that report," the Minister said from his chair across the desk from Harry. His gaze was attracted to the sheet of parchment spread out on the desk.

"May I?" the Minister asked indicating the sheet.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

The Minister picked up the sheet and looked at the list of items Harry had written down. His brow pulled down a bit as he neared the end of the list. He placed it back down on the desk and looked at Harry who looked back a bit apprehensively, picking up on the Minister's expression.

"I noticed something missing from your list, Harry."

"What was that, Sir?"

"Who you were going to have take care of each of these items," Shacklebolt said seriously.

"Well, sir, I figured these were things for me to take care of," Harry replied.

"No, Harry. I saw one, possibly two things on that list that would require your personal attention. Everything else falls into the category of administrative details and you shouldn't be dealing with those."

"Who else is there, sir? Everyone else is working on investigations or training the recruits or working at Azkaban. I can't pull any of them off those assignments to do my drudge work."

"Harry, you are in charge of all the law enforcement in our community. You don't do drudge work. You aren't back at your aunt and uncle's

house in Surrey. You have a huge job to do, Harry and you can't allow yourself to get bogged down in the details. I'm thinking that perhaps Director Grimsson and I have dropped the ball here. You made the first correct step when you appointed Maxwell your Deputy but that didn't take care of the details. You need an assistant, Harry. Someone who can take care of the little things so you can concentrate on taking care of the big ones."

"Are you sure, sir? I don't know, it just seems..." Harry tailed off.

"Harry, if you're worried about appearances, that somehow you're flaunting your position, stop worrying. You've more than demonstrated your willingness to put yourself on the line," the Minister replied with a small smile. "If you have one failing, Harry, it's the idea that you have to be the one to take all the risks, to do the dirty work. You've paid your dues, as they say, Harry. Now you have to put that experience to work for the good of all of us. We can't afford to have you laid out in a hospital bed for weeks at a time or worse. So, when I return to the office we'll start looking for someone to take up the administrative load and leave you to do what you do best, lead. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said a bit reluctantly.

They were interrupted by the return of Kreacher with their tea. He placed the tray on the desk and quietly left. He had sensed the serious nature of the discussion and he looked back at Harry with concern, then left.

"I understand that you and Miss Granger have made contact with the Centaurs, Harry," the Minister said.

"Um, oh, yes sir. While I was at Hogwarts tending to some personal matters, we were able to arrange for the meeting that had been postponed when I got hurt. There were no commitments made other than they would consider Hermione's question and gives us an answer in time," Harry replied with a half smile.

"I read Miss Granger's report. An excellent piece of work from the both of you. I've also seen some very positive feedback on the Patrollers. The public seems very pleased with their presence."

"Yes, sir."

"This is what I mean, Harry. You stick to the important things and we'll find you someone to take care of the little things."

Harry simply nodded.

"Good, well, that's all I have for today, Harry. Hopefully we'll see you back soon but not before you're well. All things considered you're doing great work in spite of your injuries," the Minister said as he stood. "Good bye for now, Harry."

Harry stood and walked the Minister to the front door then walked into the kitchen.

"Master Harry is upset?"

"No, Kreacher, not really upset. Concerned, a little confused, maybe. I guess it just seems that things are moving kind of fast that's all. I think I need to have a talk with my folks. Kreacher, I'd like you to take a message to the Ministry, please."

"Yes, Master Harry."

Harry wrote a note requesting a Ministry car to drive him to the Burrow. He was still uncomfortable with the idea of Disapparating. In less than an hour he was in one of the small sedans and was comfortably negotiating the mid afternoon traffic to the outskirts of Ottery St. Catchpole. He smiled as he saw the Burrow come into view. The sound of the car arriving had brought Molly Weasley to the door and as she saw Harry step out of the car she came forward.

"Harry, dear, what a pleasant surprise. I hope everything is alright," her voice light but with a touch of concern.

“Yeah, Mum, it’s just been a tough week and I thought I’d pay a visit and relax a bit,” Harry said, keeping his voice light.

“And?” she asked, her mother’s intuition picking up on something deeper.

Harry gave her a crooked smile and shook his head.

“And I’d like to be able to talk with you and Dad.”

“I thought so. Come inside, Harry. Arthur isn’t due for a while yet, but you can at least relax for bit.”

“Ok, Mum. Just a minute,” Harry said as he turned to the driver. “Would you please have someone pick me up here in the morning, say at eight o’clock?”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry turned around and he and his ‘mum’ walked arm and arm into the house. It always gave Harry a warm feeling to enter what he considered his refuge from the world.

“Have a seat at the table, dear, I was working on dinner. Do you fancy some tea? Something to nibble on?”

“Oh, that would be great, Mum.”

“I received an owl from Ginny yesterday. She wrote all about what was going on with that poor little girl. She’s very lucky to have found you, Harry.”

“She’s special, there’s no mistaking that. How special we don’t know yet but we’re trying to find out. I assigned Milligan, the head of our investigation unit, the job of tracking down her background.”

“Can you do that, Harry? I mean use Ministry people to do personal work?”

“No, but this isn’t really personal. Well, it is, but it’s more than that. She’s already provided information on one big case and we’ve already discussed the idea of her coming to work for me when she graduates. But we need to find out the source of her abilities if we can.”

“I see. That makes sense, I suppose.”

Harry and his ‘mum’ continued discussing what was going on at the school; plans for the weddings and anything else that wasn’t what Harry really needed to talk about until his ‘dad’ arrived. It was just after sunset when Mr. Weasley came through the kitchen door.

“I say, Harry. What a nice surprise. I hope nothing is amiss,” he said as he put down his briefcase and hung up his hat and cloak.

“Not really, Dad. A lot of things have been happening and I just felt the need to talk some things through. I hope you don’t mind. I know you’ve got a lot of things of your own to deal with.”

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley said with a mild look of exasperation. “For such an intelligent young man, you have a hard time grasping certain concepts. We are your family and this is what families are for. We discuss, listen and offer guidance. So let’s hear what’s on your mind.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said with lopsided grin. “I’m not even sure it’s all that important but I had a visit from Minister Shacklebolt at home today.”

“Really? That certainly is unusual,” Arthur Weasley said.

“I thought so, too. He said he wanted to see how I was doing. I’m not really sure why he wanted to see me but before he came I had written out a list of things I needed to take care of. He saw it and read it. He wanted to know who I was going to have take care of all those things. I said I was going to. He proceeded to give me a lecture on how I shouldn’t be worrying about all those small details. That I needed to concentrate on big things. That I needed an assistant.”

“What’s wrong with that, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley asked. “You’ve got so much to do. Isn’t that why you appointed Maxwell as your Deputy?”

"I guess so, I don't know. At that point I just figured it would be a good idea to have someone to fall back on if I couldn't be there or was up at Hogwarts. But an assistant? I mean Dad has a big job and he doesn't have an assistant."

Mr. Weasley held up two fingers.

"Two? But you never said anything."

"What's there to say, Harry? Look, when I was doing my old job there wasn't any need for that sort of thing. Now I have a lot more responsibility, more things to deal with and more people to deal with them. So the office is set up with two assistants. But it's not something I'd go around talking about. So, tell us what in the name of Merlin is so wrong about Kingsley Shacklebolt telling you that you should have an assistant."

Harry looked down at the table top and used his fingertip to trace designs in a spill of tea on the saucer in front of him. He looked up at his parents and sighed.

"When I decided I was going to apply to be an Auror it was so I could use the things I learned to fight dark witches and wizards. Now I'm not even two years out of school and I'm the Chief of Magical Law Enforcement with a deputy and I guess an assistant and I can't go out and do what I thought I'd be doing. It's getting to be, I don't know, kind of silly. I'm not even twenty one yet. I don't think I should be doing this."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looked at each other. Mr. Weasley nodded and looked at Harry.

"Harry, I think you've been living under a serious misconception. You seem to think that you need to measure yourself against what is usual or normal. Son, what I'm about to tell you isn't meant to flatter you. I'm trying to get you to see things as they really are. You aren't like other people, Harry. In the whole history of magic there hasn't been another person like you. No one has seen all the things you've seen, done the things you've done, and had done to them what has

been done to you. You can't measure yourself against anything or anyone other than yourself and what you believe is the right thing to do. As for your age, I seem to remember a young man giving an interview where he stated that he was older than his years. Do you remember who that was?"

"Yes, sir. It was me."

"It was you. Harry, you spent ten years living with an aunt and uncle and cousin who never missed an opportunity to knock you down. You had your problems at school with that Heir of Slytherin business then the TriWizards Tournament and the hammering you took from the old Ministry and the Daily Prophet. It's understandable that you may feel unprepared or unworthy to handle this job but don't think for a minute that it's true."

Arthur Weasley was leaning on the table across from Harry, his eyes locked on those of his 'son'.

"If you never cast another spell in your life you have more experience than any wizard I can think of when it comes to combating the Dark Arts. Add to that all the situations you've encountered and worked your way out of. So what would you do? Let all that go to waste because you don't think you're old enough or spent enough years paying dues?"

Harry smiled a bit and said,

"Minister Shacklebolt said I've already paid my dues."

"And you think he's wrong?"

"I don't know who's wrong or who's right, Dad. All I know is that when I look in the mirror I don't see anything much different than when I was a first year."

"Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley broke in. "People, muggle or magical, tend to fall into two groups; those who undervalue themselves and those who overvalue themselves. Very, very few know who they truly

are. Apparently you fall into the first group. Some people might say that that is a good thing. That modest people are better to have around than those with big heads and puffed up egos. They may be some truth to that but not if that modesty hides true talent that could be of benefit to those around them.”

Mrs. Weasley took hold of Harry’s hand in hers and continued,

“Witches and wizards are different from other people, Harry, and we learn to deal with it. You are different from other witches and wizards, my dear, and you must learn to deal with that. Learn to accept it and learn to use it wisely and well.”

“You know, Harry, it seems to me that you have these moments of doubt after times of great physical or emotional stress. Now I know that you’re still recovering from very serious injuries but is there something else going on?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“We already talked about Abigail. That was a pretty emotional situation I guess.”

“Yes, based on what you’ve said and what Ginny wrote I can well imagine, dear. Do you think that’s what’s bothering you?” she pressed.

Harry stood up and took his cup and plates to the sink. His parents watched him but said nothing. He came back and sat back down.

“What I told you about Abigail wasn’t the whole story,” Harry said, not making eye contact with either parent.

He proceeded to explain everything that had occurred while he was comatose and Abigail was unconscious. While he was describing his encounter with Fred, Mrs. Weasley began to tear up. By the time he was done she was sniffing into a handkerchief. They remained silent for a moment and then Mr. Weasley cleared his throat.

“Well now, Harry. I would have to say that that would certainly be considered emotionally stressful. Can I make a recommendation, son?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Don’t make any career decisions just yet,” Arthur Weasley said with a small smile. “Once again you’ve been through a great deal in a short period of time. You’ve also managed, once again, to accomplish a great deal in short period of time. Give yourself a chance to unwind a little bit. I, and many others by the way, think you’re doing a great job with the Aurors and all. That young lady, Abigail, will need your attention and there’s the wedding as well. Concentrate on those things and getting yourself well and leave the big picture alone for a while. I think in time you’ll gain a better perspective on things and you’ll be able to see your way through it all.”

Harry considered this for a few moments while his parents studied his face. He then looked at them both.

“Your probably right, Dad,” he said quietly. “I know Mum said I should just take things as they come but I guess there’s just so much coming that it’s hard not to get overwhelmed by it sometimes. Maybe, if you don’t mind, once I get back into the office, I can come up and chat with you now and again on how things are going and you can help me keep my head on straight.”

“Take out the maybe and no I don’t mind. I’d be more then happy to discuss these things with you, Harry. I hope this has helped you.”

“Yeah, Dad, it has. Hermione once accused me of having a thick skull. I guess it just takes more time to seep through then for most people,” Harry said with a shrug and a little laugh.

“Well, now that we have that taken care of, what do you two say to some dinner?” Molly Weasley asked.

Both men agreed and they quickly got the table set and dinner underway. Dinner passed pleasantly but took a more serious turn when Mrs. Weasley picked up on an earlier topic.

“Harry, dear. It may not be my place to ask but I will anyway. Have you given any thought to the practical aspects of being Abigail’s guardian?”

“What do you mean practical, Mum? I have a house where she can live, I can certainly afford it. After August, Ginny and I will be married so I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, Harry. Yes, you have a house but during the day you’ll be at work, Ginny will be in Holyhead or elsewhere. Were you planning on leaving this child home alone during the day?”

“Well, Kreacher will be there,” Harry replied.

“Kreacher is a fine enough house elf but he’s hardly proper supervision for a teenage girl, my dear.”

Harry let out a long breath.

“Great, I thought I had that problem settled.”

“Now, Harry dear, I didn’t mean it that way. I just think you should consider having her come stay here at the Burrow.”

“I don’t know, Mum. Would you really want to do that?”

“Harry, look around. The house is twice the size it used to be when we had seven children running around. To be honest it gets a little lonely here all by myself.”

“There’s only one thing, Mum. Abigail and I have developed a pretty close bond. With what I saw happen this week, I’m not sure how that would work out.”

“Hmmm, you may be right.”

“You have a fireplace, don’t you, Harry?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“Yes, sir, several.”

“And we have the one here. Why not have her stay with you at the Black house, but during the day, she can come here using floo powder and spend the day with Molly. That way she maintains the connection with you but she’s being looked after here during the day. Molly can teach her to bake and cook and she’d have plenty of room to fly that broomstick you bought for her. What do you think?”

“I’m thinking you’re a genius, Dad,” Harry replied with a smile.

“Well done, Arthur dear. We’ll know when Harry or Ginny get back to the Black house and then we can send Abigail along home,” Molly Weasley said with a smile.

When Harry returned home to the Black house he was feeling much better than when he had left. His ‘mum’ and ‘dad’ had provided some excellent advice and Molly Weasley had uncovered a serious flaw in his plan for Abigail and they worked out a great solution. He wrote a letter to Abigail letting her know what plans had been made for her summer. He sat in his overstuffed chair and used the heat bag to ease the stiffness in his left leg. He also sent a message to St. Mungo’s to see about an appointment with Dr. Stonebridge.

By one o’clock that afternoon Harry’s message to St. Mungo’s had resulted in a response with an appointment and Harry was waiting in the same examination room as when he was being cleared for his return to Hogwarts. He was in the same hospital gown, with the burn scars on his leg and arm clearly visible.

“Mr. Potter,” the healer said by way of greeting. “So, tell me what’s been happening.”

“Well, Dr. Stonebridge. It just seems like it’s taking forever for my leg to get better. It’s not so much that it hurts, but it gets tired a lot sooner than the other and the knee stiffens up a lot.”

“Hmm, let’s take a look, shall we.”

The healer took hold of the lower part of Harry’s left leg and began to bend it at the knee slowly.

“Now, tell me if you feel any pain or stiffness.”

“Um, now.”

“Yes, I can feel that,” he murmured.

He moved his hand up to feel the scar tissue around the side of the knee and then he felt around the entire knee. He let Harry’s leg rest on the edge of the examining table and took a small hammer and tested for reflexes on both knees. The left didn’t respond as much as the right. He took out his wand and held it over the knee and he murmured an incantation and Harry could feel a strange tingle go through his leg.

“Tell me what you’ve been up to since you left us in February, Mr. Potter.”

Harry proceeded to explain to the healer his time at home, his one trip to Hogwarts, no Disapparation or broomflying.

“Hmm, yes, excuse me a moment if you would,” the healer said and left the room. He returned several moments later with another healer.

“Mr. Potter, this is Dr. Antimony. He specializes in joint and bone injuries.”

“Oh, you’re an orthopedic specialist, sir?” Harry responded.

“Yes, you could say that,” Dr. Antimony replied. “Ah, yes, you were raised in a muggle household, Mr. Potter. That’s close enough.”

The new healer spent a fair amount of time probing Harry’s knee with his nimble fingers and his wand, passing it over in slow sweeps as well as touching the tip to certain areas. His brow was creased in concentration and he pursed his lips on several occasions.

“Mr. Potter, can you recall anything at all about your crash landing that caused these injuries?”

“Not a great deal, Doctor. I was pretty far gone by the time I hit the ground. I think I was coming in with the tip up so I probably hit first with my feet and lower legs. Then I just sort of tumbled through some low bushes I think.”

“Yes, that would make sense. There appears to be quite a bit of trauma to the tendons and ligaments in your knee. There may also be damage to the cartilage material at the ends of the leg bones under the patella, the kneecap. Had that been the extent of your injuries we could have applied sufficient magical remedies to get them sorted out but considering how bad off you were we just couldn’t risk it. As time goes on the less effective such remedies can be; by now, fairly useless. We’ll have to set you up with a regimen of exercises to strengthen the muscles around the knee to take up some of the stress. Otherwise it is what it is. We’ll need to assess it periodically as you go through rehabilitation, Mr. Potter. I can promise you it will get better. I can’t promise you that it will be as good as it was before the injury.”

Harry took a deep breath and let it out. He looked at the two medical wizards and nodded.

“It is what it is. I guess I can learn to deal with it. I do need to ask you a couple of questions though.”

“Certainly, Mr. Potter.”

“Is there any reason why I shouldn’t Disapparate?”

“No, Mr. Potter. With the exception of your leg, you’re fully recovered so using standard spells is no risk. I would strongly suggest you avoid any prodigious feats of magic however,” Dr. Stonebridge said with a small grin.

“I’ll try and stay out of the way of any more dragons. I guess flying a broom is ok, too?”

“Yes, but the same cautions apply. Your reputation as a flyer is well known but I wouldn’t try anything too fancy until we make some

progress on your leg. I'll get in touch with our physical therapy department and have them make arrangements."

"Thank you, Doctor. Umm, do you know if Dr. Medford would be able to talk to me today?" Harry asked.

"We can ask. I think we are done here for now, Mr. Potter. Feel free to contact us if you start having more problems with the leg."

"Thank you, Dr. Stonebridge, Dr. Antimony."

"You're most welcome, Mr. Potter. Why don't you get changed and I'll see if Dr. Medford is available."

"Alright," Harry replied.

As Harry was tying up his shoes a nurse poked her head in the door of the examination room.

"Mr. Potter, Dr. Medford can see you in his office now. You can take the elevator to the fourth floor and his office is the third door on the left."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry replied.

Taking his cane he walked out of the room and down to the elevator. Within five minutes he was knocking on the door of Dr. Medford's office.

"Come in."

Harry swung the door open and stepped in. The tall, older wizard rose from behind his desk and came out to meet Harry.

"Harry, I'm glad to see you. You look much better then the last time I saw you," the healer said.

"You mean up at Hogwarts that time?" Harry asked.

“Oh, no, Harry. I mean when you were here after your run in with that dragon.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Medford. I don’t remember seeing you, only Dr. Stonebridge.”

“Well, Harry, I saw a lot of you. It was twice a day while you were comatose and once a day while you were mostly sleeping the next two weeks. We were very concerned that you had done yourself permanent damage pouring out that much magical energy. May I?” the healer asked while raising his hand in the way Harry knew meant he wanted to check Harry’s brain function.

“Yes, sir.”

Doctor Medford placed his hand alongside Harry’s head, his thumb on his temple and the fingertips at the back of his skull. Harry could feel the tingle that marked the examination.

“Looks good, Harry. So what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Well, sir, I’ve come across something that is pretty extraordinary and I thought you might know something about it,” Harry said as he and the healer took seats. “Have you ever come across anyone who had mental abilities, you know, a seer, someone who could tell the future, that sort of thing?”

“I’m afraid not, Harry. Someone like that is very, very rare. The last one I ever heard of was Cassandra Trelawney and that was what, three or four generations ago. I’ve never had the opportunity to study the phenomenon beyond reading some accounts,” the healer replied.

“Would you be interested?”

“Why? Do you know of someone, Harry?” the healer said eagerly.

“Yes, sir. She’s a third year student at Hogwarts. I first met her when I was in my seventh year and I was teaching first year Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. It’s not so much that she sees the future as

she can see the present elsewhere and she can trace back where someone has been. She's muggle born and an orphan," Harry said.

Dr. Medford raised an eyebrow at the last.

"Somehow there is a bond between the two of us," Harry said and went on to give an abbreviated version of the two instances when he and Abigail had interacted in that shadowy place.

"My God, Harry, this is amazing," Dr. Medford said. "This is unlike anything I've ever heard of."

"Yes, sir. Professor Dumbledore and the other Heads at Hogwarts have said the same thing. One Headmistress thought that maybe with what has happened to me I've somehow thinned the barrier between life and death and that barriers had no meaning for Abigail."

"That sort of thing is quite a bit beyond what I know anything about, Harry, but I would be glad to meet this young lady and see what we can find out about the two of you. Once school is out for the term please come see me."

"Thank you, Dr. Medford. I will do that."

With a handshake Harry left the healer's office and headed for home. Since he was given the go ahead he Disapparated into the lobby of the Ministry building and slowly made his way to his office, partly due to walking with the cane but mostly due to the numerous stops he made to accept the many greetings and wishes for his good health. When he got to his office he opened the door, expecting it to be as dusty as when he first took occupancy. He was surprised to see it was looking freshly cleaned and his desk polished. He sat down and pulled out a sheet of parchment to rebuild the list that he had started at home but had to be redone based on the comments of the Minister and Arthur Weasley. He was at it for about fifteen minutes when he heard a quiet knock on the doorframe.

"Sir?"

"Hello, Maxwell, come on in," Harry said as he looked up from his work.

"Are you sure you should be here, sir?" Maxwell asked.

"I just came from St. Mungo's. Except for the banged up leg, it seems I'm recovered. So I figured it was time to start showing myself around here again. I may not be ready for full days work yet but it's a start. So, how are things going?"

"Much the same as the last time we spoke, sir. Patrollers are training, we're working on guards for Azkaban and it seems that there is growing pressure to get us to release that portal to the spooks in Mysteries."

"Not yet. I still have some questions to get answered before we close that crime scene. If anyone makes a fuss have them come see me. Anything else?"

"Milligan is off on some assignment but I assume you know about that."

"Yes, I put him on something special yesterday. Once I know what he finds out I'll fill you in."

Maxwell just nodded. He left a few minutes later. Harry continued working on his list when he heard another knock.

"Um, Mr. Potter, sir?"

Harry looked up and was surprised at the person he saw standing in the doorway.

"Tom? Tom Medford?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir. Do you have a few minutes to spare?" the former Gryffindor Prefect asked.

"Of course, come in and sit down. What can I do for you?" Harry asked.

"Well, sir. I guess this is sort of a job interview. I happened to hear this morning that you were going to be looking for an assistant and then word was you had come into the office this afternoon so I came down to talk to you."

"You want to be my assistant, Tom? Whatever for?" Harry asked incredulously.

Tom looked at Harry quizzically. He began to speak a couple of times but hesitated. The he finally said,

"Sir, I don't know if you realize it or not, but this office, the new Law Enforcement section is where all the action is, as they say. I thought about trying out for the Patrollers but I have some back problems from a bad broom crash several summers ago. I didn't think I'd get past the physical requirements. So I've been working up in Magical Catastrophes. That's where I heard Mr. Weasley talking about you being pushed by the Minister to get an assistant. Mr. Weasley is great to work for but all I've been doing is helping obliviate witnesses," he finished looking a little embarrassed.

"Well, Tom, if you think being my assistant would get you close to the action, as you say, I'm afraid you're out of luck. By my own choice and encouragement from the Minister, I'm not doing any more field work. I'll be spending most of my time here at the office with some trips to Hogwarts," Harry said.

"I'm aware of that, sir. I wasn't thinking of being able to do field work. I just want to be part of the work of building up the new Enforcement program, the work you're doing with the other magical races and the stronger relationship with Hogwarts. I guess you could say I'm more interested in the policy end of the work."

"Are you qualified to Disapparate?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir. No restrictions," Tom replied.

"How's your wand work and charms?"

"I passed my NEWT for Charms with an Exceeds Expectations," Tom replied, a bit puzzled.

"Just because you're looking to do policy work, Tom, doesn't mean you might not find yourself in a tough situation at some point. Plus you'd be dealing with some pretty hard boiled personalities with the original Aurors. I wouldn't want you dealing from a weak position if they didn't think you had the skills, if you understand my meaning."

"Yes, sir. I believe I do. I understand even with your credentials they gave you a hard time," Tom replied thoughtfully.

Harry looked at the former Gryffindor who was only a year younger than himself and nodded.

"Ok, Tom, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll request a temporary reassignment from Catastrophes and we'll see how you work out. Fair enough?"

"Yes, sir. That would be great."

Harry took out a piece of parchment and wrote the following note to his 'Dad'.

To Director Weasley

Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes

I respectfully request the temporary reassignment of Thomas Medford to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement with the intent that he serve as the Administrative Assistant to the Chief, Magical Law Enforcement section.

Respectfully yours,

Harry James Potter

PS You thought it was a good idea, after all.

H.

Harry folded the parchment and put a wax seal on it. He handed it across to Tom and said,

“Ok, Tom, take that up to Mr. Weasley and see what he says.”

“Yes, sir and thank you,” Tom said enthusiastically.

“Wait until you see what the job is like before you thank me,” Harry replied.

Harry watched as Tom left his office in haste with a small smile. He hoped that Tom’s enthusiasm would last. He took the list that he was working on and began noting where he could put his new assistant to work. Something had been nagging at Harry for the last few days. Something someone had said, possibly in passing, yet nonetheless important was trying to push its way to the front of Harry’s mind but it was having trouble getting through the clutter. Harry got up and closed his door and then sat down behind his desk again. He placed his hands on the desk in front of him and closed his eyes and took several deep breaths to clear his mind. When he felt relaxed he began to sift backwards through the events of the last few days and tried to recall what people had said to him. His conversations with Ginny, Professor McGonagall, Abigail and the rest replayed themselves out. Suddenly his eyes popped open and he sat forward in his chair. Madame Rosemerta had said something to Harry when he first entered her pub. When Harry had said he didn’t want to impose on her she replied,

“Impose? You have an awful long way to go before you become an imposition around here, young fellow. Your Patrollers already more than paid for the room when they stopped some rowdies from breaking up my furniture. Sit yourself down right over there and I’ll be right over.”

It was the mention of rowdies breaking up her furniture that had been nagging at Harry. He had never really spent anytime in Hogsmeade when it wasn’t swarming with Hogwarts students. What was the place really like? He could recall seeing some of the fringe members of the magical community but he had no idea what kind of issues the

residents and business owners of Hogsmeade might have. He wondered how this flaw in his plan had escaped notice so long. He was scribbling on the piece of parchment when someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Harry called out.

Tom came in holding the same piece of parchment and smiling. He handed the message to Harry who opened it and read the note below his original request.

Harry,

Agreed. Well chosen. He can begin immediately.

Arthur Weasley

PS. It's a terrible thing when a son picks his father's pocket.

A.

Harry laughed and placed the sheet on his desk. He looked at Tom and waved him into a chair.

“We'll look around for a place for you to sit, not that you'll be sitting much. First, take this up to the Director's secretary so she can put you down on the department's roles. Then I need you to do some digging for me.”

Harry then went on to explain what he had realized about the distribution of the Patrollers based on the comments of Madame Rosemerta.

“So I need you to conduct a survey of sorts. First talk to the Patroller trainers and see what kind of information they've been getting about problems or incidents in the Alleys and Hogsmeade. Then talk to the individual shop owners in each area and put together a picture of where things are happening and how often. I'll give you a letter of introduction so people know you're working for me,” Harry said as he handed the parchment back to Tom.

“Yes, sir. I’ll run this up and be right back.”

He watched as Tom left his office and then he took another sheet of parchment and began writing out a short letter that Tom could use if he needed to establish his authenticity. He reread it and then folded it and placed it on the corner of his desk. He resumed his assault on his list of things to do now taking into account that he had someone to assign things to. He looked up at the clock on the wall and noticed it was getting late so he started to put things away with an eye towards going home. He was almost ready when Tom returned.

“I’m all set, sir. The Director’s secretary got me on the department’s list and then the Director happened to come out and when he found out what I was there for he seemed quite pleased. He asked his secretary if there was any space available and apparently there’s a small space just down the hall. I’m going to check it in a bit. Is there anything else you need me to do?”

“No, Tom, I think you should get yourself squared away and then tomorrow start in on your survey. I’m working on some things now, so I’ll leave you the list when it’s done.”

He handed Tom the letter he had written.

“Yes, sir, and thank you again, sir, for this opportunity,” Tom said.

“You’re welcome,” Harry said and then indicated that Tom should precede him from the office.

Harry went to the lobby and Disapparated back to the Black House. Kreacher of course let him in. While the house elf was preparing Harry’s dinner he sat at his desk and wrote a note to Ginny telling her of the things that had happened with the Minister and her folks and then Tom. It was nice to be able to write something that was mostly positive. He went to his room to send it off by owl and when he returned his dinner was on his desk.

Over the next couple of weeks Harry’s life took on a routine where he spent all morning and half the afternoon in the office and the rest of

the afternoon at home reading through his collection of books looking for any mention of the portal or what had occurred between Abigail and himself. He made a couple of trips to Flourish and Blotts to look for anything that might help and again came up empty. Ginny was able to make weekend visits and they started looking at setting up one of the upper storey bedrooms for when Abigail came for the summer. Ginny was particularly happy to discover that despite the condition of Harry's leg it did not hinder them from enjoying nights every bit as exciting as the ones they shared shortly before his encounter with the dragon.

At the beginning of the third week Harry's afternoons took on a different pattern where three days a week he would have to report to St. Mungo's for his therapy sessions. Tom Medford was proving to be a valuable addition to Harry's team. The survey that Harry had assigned to him was completed halfway through the second week and indicated that indeed Hogsmeade did have an appreciably higher incident rate of public disturbances than the Alleys. With the exception of the Leaky Cauldron, Diagon Alley pretty much closed down by nightfall and any activity in Knockturn Alley of that nature usually occurred in private, away from prying eyes. Hogsmeade had the two pubs and full time residents as well as visits from both Hogwarts students and folks from the wilder surroundings. It appeared that the town would need more coverage at night, particularly weekends and on those Saturdays that the students were around. Tom had also made some serious inroads into the list Harry gave him including the preparation of formal thank you notes to both Kandak and Bane and Ronan for helping start the reconciliation process.

Sooner than he would have imagined the day arrived when George and Angelina were to be married. Harry had been busy with work and getting caught up so he hadn't been around the Burrow that much as preparations were being made for the big day. When he arrived on Saturday morning he was dressed his best thanks to the combination of Ginny's choice of a new black dress robe that was subtly embroidered with dark gray thread. He looked around and saw that

the field across from the Burrow was arranged in a similar manner to when Bill and Fleur were married.

He chose to stay out of the way after saying his hellos and he took a seat in a chair that was set aside for him by his 'adopted' parents. He sat alone as Ginny was to be a member of the bridal party so she would make her appearance when the bride did. Harry had been offered the opportunity to be an usher but he declined. George expressed his disappointment but Harry explained he was afraid his notoriety would distract from the stars of the day, namely the bride and groom. What he didn't say was he was afraid any extended time on his feet would push him to use his cane and he was uncomfortable doing that in front of the number of people that would be in attendance.

Harry watched as others began to arrive and were shown to their seats by Percy, Charlie and Ron. Bill was going to be George's best man. Angelina had chosen her friend and teammate Alicia Spinnet as her maid of honor. Ginny and Katie Bell completed the party. Harry had joked that since they were all accomplished Quidditch players they should arrive on broomsticks. Harry was forced to make a concession. Since Bill was part of the wedding party, as was Ginny, he would serve as Fleur's escort. He loved the silver haired beauty as the big sister he never had but he knew she would draw attention like moths to a flame and he had been trying to avoid attention today. But she would not be denied. To compound the problem the entire Delacour family had been invited and that meant Gabrielle would be there. Ginny had long ago gotten over any ill feeling toward the younger version of Fleur and her hero worship of Harry but he still found it somewhat disconcerting. He never let on, however, since he feared he would unduly upset the girl if she thought he was unhappy with her.

As if on cue several pops produced Madame and Monsieur Delacour and Gabrielle. A loud squeal was heard from the house and Fleur dashed out the front door to meet her family as they came up the walkway. After many hugs and kisses, Fleur turned and waved to Harry to come join them. He rose from his chair but left the cane behind as it was only a short walk. It was still early in his therapy and the leg still hindered his gait somewhat so he took his time although

his smile was wide and genuine. He received a hug from the mother and a firm handshake from the father. Up close the relationship between Fleur and Gabrielle was nearly blindingly obvious. The same long silver blonde hair. The color of the eyes and shape of the face was nearly identical. At fourteen she was just starting to show the maturity that would attract serious attention.

“Bon jour, ma petite soeur,” Harry said as he stepped forward to give his ‘little sister’ a hug.

When he stepped back he saw her blushing to the roots of her silver hair, her mouth in a smile wide while simultaneously trying to suppress a giggle. Once she regained her composure she looked at Fleur who nodded as if to urge her onward. Gabi looked back at Harry and began speaking.

“ello, mon frere ‘arry. Eet ees very bonne...I mean good to see you,” she said, struggling a bit. “We were un’appy to ‘ear that you were injured, yes? I am so ‘appy to know you are feeleng better, oui, yes?”

She looked at Harry and swallowed. He grinned broadly and took Gabi’s hands in his and said,

“Thank you very much, Gabi. Your sister has told me many times that you were concerned about my health but it is so much nicer to hear it from you. Your English is getting much better. Much better then my French.”

Gabi looked to Fleur and she provided a quick translation and when she was done her younger sister positively glowed. Fleur then added something more in French to her parents which apparently indicated they should go inside to see the Weasleys. As her family walked by she hung back a moment and stepped up to Harry.

“You ‘ave made her day, mon frere. She has been so excited to see you. When she was told that you would be coming back weeth us she almost fainted. You are sure that the trip will not be too much for you?”

"No, Fleur. If I keep the walking and stair climbing to a reasonable amount I'll be fine," he said, smiling to reassure her.

"Professor LeMond was very 'appy that you would be able to come to Beauxbaton thees year. He feared your injury would keep you away. They are very excited you will be there," Fleur said with a smile.

"I'm glad to be able to do it, Fleur. It's was tough just hanging around the house but I'm glad to be back at work again."

"You look much better, mon frere. And you are looking so very 'andsome today. Geeny's choice of robes make you look very, comment voulez-vous dire, um, how do you say, dignified. You should wear those at Beauxbaton."

"You think so? I would have thought just some plain robes like at school," he said.

"'arry. You are no longer a student at 'ogwarts. You are a world renowned weezard, 'ighly regarded for your courage and knowledge. Mon Dieu, do not look at me that way. You 'ave no idea 'ow your actions 'ave impressed the wizarding world. I do not weesh to upset you today but we will speak of thees more. Come weeth me inside. Today you are my escort and I am most demanding as my 'usband can tell you," the last she said with a silvery laugh as she hooked her arm in his and walked him into the house to rejoin her family.

The ceremony was scheduled to begin at noon. At a quarter to twelve the guests who put off being seated began to converge on the Weasley brothers to be shown their seats. Angelina's parents had arrived around eleven thirty and now the parents of both the bride and groom made their way together to their seats at the front of the two columns of chairs arranged on the field. It was a pleasantly warm day with high fluffy clouds floating overhead. A large arbor had been erected and beneath it Angelina and George would pledge their vows. Ginny, Hermione and Fleur had collaborated and festooned the arbor with flowers in the Gryffindor colors. At five minutes before the hour, George and Bill took up their positions on one side of the small raised platform that had been set up so that the somewhat diminutive wizard

who had officiated at Bill and Fleur's wedding could be at more or less eye level with the taller bride and groom.

Harry had escorted Fleur down the aisle and she quite literally glowed. Her parents and Gabi followed behind, the younger sister bracketed by the two pairs of adults. The elder Delacours gave no indication that they noticed the number of young male heads that swiveled to follow their second daughter as she glided down the aisle. Fleur and Harry entered the second row of seats behind the Weasleys. Gabi moved to follow and the Delacours came next. This left Harry bracketed by the two silver haired sisters. From behind this made for quite a contrast. Harry with his unruly black hair and dark robes provided contrast to the long silver tresses and pale gowns of the sisters. A few moments after they were seated chimes announced that the hour of noon had arrived. One by one, members of the bridal party popped into view at the rear edge of the aisle and began walking toward the arbor. First came Ginny looking radiant in a pale green gown, her long red hair flowing down her back. Harry couldn't take his eyes off of her. The other guests were able to see Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet follow behind in matching gowns. Lastly, the bride, wearing an elegant white gown that highlighted her tall slender frame. As she moved at what could only be described as a stately pace she tried to control herself but she kept breaking into a wide smile. As Ginny passed the row that Harry was in, she tilted her head slightly in his direction and winked. It was Harry's turn to split into a wide grin. The bride's maids turned and made way for Angelina to take her place at George's side, who likewise was unable to suppress a smile.

"Let us begin," the little wizard said.

Harry heard little of what transpired under the arbor. He simply couldn't pay attention to anything other than his own beautiful bride to be as she stood beside her former teammates. She kept looking back over her shoulder at Harry and whenever their eyes met he smiled and she blushed. And then it was over. The sound of applause snapped Harry back to the here and now and he saw Angelina and George sharing their first kiss as husband and wife. He also became aware that on either side of him were the sounds of crying and sniffing. Not sure what to do he hesitated a moment then put an arm around each slender shoulder and offered what support he could.

Gabi remained upright but Fleur leaned into Harry and put her head on his shoulder. Harry turned and looked down at her and he could see that she looked sad. He whispered,

“What’s wrong, Fleur?” his voice full of concern.

“Oh, ‘arry, eet ees nothing really, eet’s just that eet was so beautiful and then I thought ‘ow for Bill and I eet all went so bad so fast. I wish we ‘ad ‘ad a least a little time to enjoy that moment.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. He realized that no matter how happy the rest of their lives would be, Fleur and Bill would always have that memory of how darkness had fallen on what should have been such a bright day. He always knew others had suffered from what Voldemort had tried to do but it hurt whenever he saw it so close to home. He gave Fleur another squeeze and rested his head on top of hers. Then it was time to stand and follow the bride and groom to where the tables and dance floor had been set up. Gabi managed to squeeze in between her mother and father and Harry walked arm and arm with Fleur with her pressed up close to his side.

They stood and watched as the bride and groom shared their first dance and then danced with each others’ parents and then the bridal party joined in. Harry watched as Ginny made her way around the floor with Percy. On several occasions she looked over and Harry could see that while she was enjoying herself she would rather be dancing with him. As the first series of dances concluded Harry, with his arm still linked to Fleur’s, managed to catch Bill’s eye. He motioned him over. Bill came over, a puzzled look on his face.

“What’s going on, Harry?”

Harry transferred Fleur’s arm to that of her husband.

“I believe you should be the one to share Fleur’s first dance today,” Harry said quietly.

Bill still looked puzzled but Fleur’s face brightened and she looked at Harry with teary eyes and reached out to touch the side of his face then pull his head forward to kiss one cheek.

“Merci beaucoup, mon frere,” she whispered.

Then she wrapped her arms around her husband in a fiercely tight embrace and then led him out onto the dance floor, her husband still looking confused. While he watched the two make their way further onto the floor he failed to notice someone come up besides him and tuck in against his side. He looked over and down and saw Ginny smiling up at him, a questioning look in her eyes.

“The wedding reminded Fleur of how hers had ended. It made her sad. I thought she needed to make some better memories of being at a wedding with Bill,” he said with a smile and a shrug.

Ginny slipped her arms around Harry and hugged him tightly. The rest of the reception passed with a great deal of fun, noise and joy. Apparently, George had passed out a number of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes and they were set off with stunning results. When it came time to cut the wedding cake expectations ran high that something spectacular was about to occur. Instead, the bride and groom fed each other a bit of cake with great decorum and restraint. Then they shared a brief kiss. Later on George confided to Harry that they figured the best gag was to let people think they were going to pull a caper with the cake and then play it straight. Harry could only shake his head and think of how well suited the two were for each other. As the sun set, magic lanterns began to glow and the revelers settled down to a dinner under the stars and quite conversations about this wedding compared to others past. Except for Bill and Fleur’s. As the crescent moon began to rise guests began taking their leave of the bride and groom and their parents. Finally it was just the Weasleys, the Johnsons, and Harry and Hermione.

“Harry, how are you feeling, dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“Content,” Harry said almost without thinking.

His ‘mum’ smiled and then said,

“That’s lovely, Harry, but I meant your leg. You’ve been on it a great deal today,” she said kindly.

"It's tired and a little sore, but it was worth it. This was a great day," Harry said with a smile.

"And we owe it all to you, Harry," Angelina said.

Harry looked at her, his smile fading to be replaced by that serious look that was always followed with that quiet voice.

"No, Angelina. Not me, not alone anyway. There were so many, many others that played so many roles in getting us to where we could have this day. So many who aren't here to share this night but deserve so much of the credit. Most people would agree with you, sister of mine," he said with a small smile, "but I know better."

He sat back in his chair, oblivious to the looks he was receiving as he gazed into the heavens overhead, wondering what road signs were shining up there.

Harry's Future, Part XIV

Harry awoke from a light doze to see the countryside of southern France quickly slipping by the window. He, in the company of the entire Delacour family, was on his way to Beauxbaton Academy of Magic as a guest of Professor Jacques LeMond as he had promised all those months ago. It was the Monday after George and Angelina had been married. The wedding had been a complete success with both the participants and weather cooperating to produce a truly memorable event. The timing of the two events had allowed the Delacours to act as Harry's companions and guides for his first trip outside of Great Britain. They had taken the Channel Tunnel train from London to Paris and were now rolling south to Marseilles. Fleur assured Harry that the Academy would provide transportation the rest of the way. He thought about what lay ahead and he let out a sigh.

"Such a big sigh, 'arry. Does sometheeng bother you, mon frère?" Fleur asked as she sat next to him in the compartment.

"I guess I'm just a little nervous, Fleur. I just hope I don't do anything to embarrass myself or anything," he said with a little smile.

"'arry, 'ow could you theenk such a theeng?"

"I don't know. I guess seeing you and your classmates arrive for the Tournament and how you've described the school and all, it all seemed so sophisticated, you know? I don't want to come across like some kind of clown or something."

Fleur had been sitting somewhat close to Harry and now she slid back on the seat so she could look at him more fully.

"Mon Dieu, 'arry. Eef I did not know you better I would 'ave said you are making the joke. Yes, Beauxbaton ees a magnificent place and we take great pride een our school and ourselves. Thees does not mean that you should feel embarrassed or, what? You feel inferior? 'arry, remember they weell be measuring themselves against you, not the other way around," she finished, holding on to Harry's forearm and smiling at him.

Harry looked across the compartment to see the other Delacours looking at him. Gabrielle was nodding as she understood most of what was said. The parents looked over to Fleur obviously for a recount in French. After Fleur did so, Mr. Delacour looked back at Harry and said something which Fleur then translated.

“Papa says do not be concerned, they weell not know what ‘it them,” and then she giggled.

Harry looked at Monsieur Delacour and said,

“Merci.”

Gabi was nodding emphatically. Harry decided he could still be a little nervous. It wasn’t much longer until the train glided to a stop at the Marseilles station and the five got off the train. Fleur spotted something and she grabbed Harry’s arm excitedly.

“arry, look,” she said as she pointed to a small group of inconspicuously dressed people who were standing off to one side on the platform. “There ees Professor LeMond. Eet looks like ‘e ‘as bought several other teachers and students to greet you. I told you you ‘ad nothing to worry about.”

As Harry and the Delacours approached the small party, Professor LeMond stepped forward and offered his hand to Harry. Harry took it and as they shook hands the Professor said,

“Welcome to France, Monsieur Potter.”

He then finished his welcome in French.

“‘e says that ‘e ees most pleased that you ‘ave taken the time to come to Beauxbaton and the entire school ees most excited to welcome you. Transportation ees waiting.”

The Professor smiled and after Harry shook hands with the others that had come to meet him he was escorted to a pair of small vans. Harry and the Delacours, along with the Professor, got into the first

and the others in the party took the second. The Professor said something and Fleur translated,

“The muggle vans weell take us outside the city, yes, and then more suitable transportation weell be used,” she said with a knowing smile.

“What aren’t you telling me, Fleur?” Harry asked a bit suspiciously.

“You weell love eet, ‘arry. I weell not ruin the surprise,” she said with an impish grin.

Harry gave her a ‘look’ and then settled back in his seat to watch the famous, and infamous, port city of Marseilles go by. Eventually they reached a spot outside the city where they could pull in under the trees and they got out. They walked to a small clearing and after the Professor called out the air shimmered and there before them was the hugely ornate carriage that Harry had seen when the Beauxbaton team had arrived at Hogwarts. The massive horses stamped in their traces as if impatient to be off. Harry saw the carriage shift a bit and then the large door opened and an imposing figure emerged.

“Madame Maxime?” Harry said incredulously.

“You are surprised to see me, ‘arry Potter?” she said with a laugh.

“I was expecting to see you at the Academy, ma’am,” Harry said, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“Oh no, that would be very bad manners. You are our guest. Please, everyone, entre’ and let us leave immediately,” she said, waving them all toward the carriage with her large hands.

She allowed Harry to enter first, then she climbed in behind him, followed by the others.

“Please, Monsieur Potter, sit across from me so we may speak more easily.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Harry took a seat across from the massive Headmistress with Fleur taking the one closest to his side. The rest found chairs and couches in various places about the massive carriage. With a wave of her hand the horses strained and the entire assemblage lifted off the ground and began the journey in the gathering darkness. Madame Maxime looked at Harry as if appraising him.

“You have grown much since I last saw you, Monsieur Potter. When we buried poor Dumblydore,” she said the last with a sigh.

“I think I’m pretty much the same size, Madame Maxime. And please, just call me Harry.”

“arry? Yes, but I did not mean your stature, ‘arry. But grown you most certainly ‘ave.”

Having made the one observation the Headmistress changed the tenor of the conversation to light pleasantries often engaging Fleur or one of the others in French. The journey was a pleasant one. The massive carriage did not react to the movement of the air around it so there were no bumps or dips to disturb them. It wasn’t a long trip and soon Harry could feel the change in direction as they began a curving glide down to the grounds of the Academy. With a single gentle bump the huge carriage came to a rolling stop. To no one in particular Harry said,

“I wish I could fly and land so smoothly.”

Madame Maxime beamed. The door was swung open and the professors and students hung back as Madame Maxime made towards the door. As it swung open she stepped down and then turned to indicate Harry should come next. As he emerged he was struck by two overwhelming sensory impacts. The first was sound. A resounding roar went up from what appeared to be the entire student body. The second was sight. Behind the students stood the imposing edifice of the Beauxbaton palace. The marble exterior gleamed golden in the reflected light of the full moon. All the windows were brightly lit. Towers soared into the night sky giving the whole structure an airy, almost delicate appearance. Harry could only blink as he tried to take it all in.

What Harry wouldn't have been aware of is that the assembled students and faculty considered him just as impressive. He had slipped into his new formal robes as they flew and the black with dark gray accents gave him a dignified air. The long time seated during the day had stressed his leg almost as much as walking so he was forced to use the twisted wood cane that Madame Pomfrey had first given him. It added to his serious demeanor and served as a reminder that here was a wizard who bore the scars of combat with both dark wizards and magical beasts. He moved along at Madame Maxime's side, the Headmistress moving with a studied slowness. The students stood straighter as she passed but continued their applause. Madame Maxime escorted Harry up the steps leading to the main door followed by the others with the student body closing in behind. At the top Madame Maxime turned and Harry followed her lead. Fleur came to stand next to Harry. In a booming voice, Madame Maxime addressed the assembled students and Fleur offered Harry a running translation. It went something like this.

"We are privileged to welcome Mr. Harry Potter, graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the current Chief of Magical Law Enforcement for the British Ministry of Magic. His reputation far exceeds these few simple words but I wished to thank him for accepting the invitation of Professor LeMond to visit us here and share with us his experience and knowledge. I trust you will all afford him every courtesy and make him welcome."

The Headmistress then turned to Harry and said,

"Would you like to say a few words, 'arry?"

"Oh, ok," he then looked at Fleur who smiled and produced her wand and lightly tapped both Harry and her throat and said 'Sonorous' each time. Harry smiled.

"Merci beaucoup, Madame Maxime. I'm honored and humbled by your reception and I hope that I can fulfill your expectations. I look forward to meeting as many of you as I can. I also want to thank the Delacours for accompanying me on the trip here to make sure I didn't get lost," the last said with a small grin.

When Fleur's translation finished the students laughed.

"Lastly, my thanks to my big sister, Fleur, for providing the translation and to my little sister, Gabrielle, for helping me feel at home here. Thank you again."

Fleur blushed bright red as she made the translation and Gabi almost passed out when she heard Harry refer to her as his little sister. When Fleur finished there was another round of applause and the Madame Maxime turned and with a wave of her hand opened the large double doors and escorted her guest of honor through the large entry hall and into the Great Dining Hall for the grand dinner that was prepared to welcome Harry.

It was unlike anything Harry had ever experienced before. Fleur's descriptions of the palace did it little justice. The interior marble gleamed more brightly than did the outside. The perpetual ice sculptures looked as if people and animals had been turned into the ice itself, they were so lifelike. Great chandeliers hung from the high ceiling to cast a soft illumination on the rows of tables below. The sounds of chamber music drifted around the hall as the students and staff and their special guest entered. Once Harry and the Headmistress were past the ends of the tables the students were able to fan out and take their places while the mismatched pair continued their stately pace to the head table. Harry was feeling more than a little conspicuous walking next to the towering Headmistress and it didn't help that he was moving slowly with the cane. When they finally were able to sit down Harry did so with a sigh of relief that did not go unnoticed. From her large ornate chair, some might call it a throne, Madame Maxime looked down at Harry and asked,

"The leg, eet bothers you still, 'arry?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's been a long day so it tends to get fatigued and a little sore."

"We have a very gifted 'ealer 'ere at Beauxbaton. I am sure she would be glad to try and 'elp you," she said with obvious concern.

“Thank you, Madame. I’ve been to St. Mungo’s and they are trying to help with therapy but it wouldn’t hurt to get a second opinion,” he said with a smile, which she returned.

When all the students and faculty were seated the Headmistress tapped her goblet with a silver spoon and the tables filled with all manner of dishes, bowls and platters. Harry wondered if there were house elves here at Beauxbaton or did they do it some other way. The variety was bewildering and the dishes weren’t anything that Harry had seen before. Fleur had taken a seat next to Harry on the side opposite her former Headmistress. She leaned in and whispered to Harry telling him what each item was and what she thought he might find enjoyable. Harry had to concede that Fleur was either a very good guesser or she knew him far better than he had thought possible.

As he sampled the various dishes he let his gaze roam about the hall. He didn’t know if it was normal or because this was a special event but the students appeared to be more subdued during the meal than their British counterparts. Conversations were muted and generally confined to immediate neighbors. He happened to make eye contact with Gabi and he gave her a smile and he saw her struggle to stifle a giggle which set off some of her neighbors as well. Gabi had removed the light cloak that she had worn during the trip and Harry noticed a pin on her robe just above the Beauxbaton crest. He noticed that many of the students sitting around Gabi wore a similar pin as did a number of students scattered about the tables. Harry looked over at Fleur.

“Fleur, what does the pin that Gabi and the others are wearing mean?” he asked.

Fleur’s eyes flicked out to the students and then back to Harry. He heard her mumble,

“Mon Dieu.” Then she sighed. “I am sorry, ‘arry. I did not thenk to tell you. Do you remember what we talked about after my family came for that wonderful Christmas?”

Harry got a sinking feeling and said,

“Oh, no, not that.”

“Oui, mon frere. That is the official pin for members of the Harry Potter Fan Club,” she said as she watched the look of dismay flow across Harry’s face.

“I thought that would have died out by now. That was what, three years ago?” he said in a strangled voice.

“I am afraid not, ‘arry. Eet ees a very popular club ‘ere and eet was officially recognized by Madame Maxime last year. That ees why they can wear the pin on their robes. Gabi ees ‘oping that you will be able to meet with the club but I warned ‘er that you ‘ave a very bizzy schedule. I ‘ope you are not angry with me, mon ami, for not telling you sooner but with all you ‘ave ‘ad to deal with these last years I did not want to add to your concerns.”

Harry looked at the beautiful young woman that had become so important in his life. He took a deep breath and let it out as he thought of a comment he once made to Ginny about how she should never be surprised at what he would do for his family, they meant so much to him.

“Tell Gabi I will be glad to meet with her and her club at some point his week. Having come all this way and not doing it would probably disappoint her tremendously and I couldn’t live with that.”

Fleur’s face lit up like one of the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. She gripped his forearm and gave it a squeeze. Harry had a thought and turned to Madame Maxime.

“Excuse me, Madame. Who is working out the schedule for my visit?”

“Ah, that would be Professor LeMond. Ees there something you would wish to know?”

“I thought I would try to set aside some time to visit with some friends that I guess I have here,” he said with a crooked smile.

He saw her turn her head and look out to the tables. She nodded and then called out,

“Gabrielle Delacour.”

She gave a wave to summon the girl to the head table. Harry could see her struggle up from the bench and hurry to where they sat.

“Monsieur Potter ‘as something ‘e would like to say to you,” Madame Maxime said.

Gabi tried to control her expression as she looked over at Harry expectantly.

“Gabi, your sister tells me the Fan Club is still going strong?”

“Oui, yes, ‘arry, eet es,” she said breathlessly.

“Well, I thought that while I was here that it might be nice to meet them. Could you arrange that for me, please?” Harry asked.

Gabi’s eyes almost popped out of her head and her smile could have lit up the night sky. She was so excited she couldn’t speak in English. She rattled off a stream of French to her sister but was interrupted by Madame Maxime who said something that included the name of Professor LeMond and waved Gabi down the table. The young beauty quickly moved to stand before the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who produced a folded parchment that they both began to examine. Madame Maxime simply smiled at Harry and when he turned to Fleur she too smiled at him and added,

“That was very kind of you, mon frere.”

“Family, Fleur, anything for family,” Harry said with a shrug.

Harry saw Gabi finish her conversation with Professor LeMond and then return to face the Headmistress who apparently dismissed her to her table. Gabi dropped a quick curtsy and with a last smile at Harry hurried back to her table. She immediately began an intense

conversation that seemed to spread like ripples on a pond. Harry could only shake his head.

The meal ended shortly thereafter and with a last statement of welcome for Harry, the Headmistress dismissed the class. The elder Delacours bid Harry and Fleur good night as they were returning home. An older student wizard escorted Harry to his guest room where he found his luggage had been placed and someone had unpacked for him. Harry grew suspicious at this point and said quietly,

“Kreacher? Are you in here?”

“Yes, Master Harry,” the little elf said, his head popping up from the other side of the bed. “Master Harry is here, Kreacher should be here.”

“You can Disapparate this far?” Harry asked, amazed.

“House elves do not Disapparate, Master Harry. House elves just move.”

Harry gave a mental shrug. He knew house elf magic was different than human but this was pretty impressive stuff. He was, however, happy to have Kreacher around. It had been a long day and he was certainly in need of a good nights sleep. He was also glad he had the presence of mind to pack Madame Pomfrey’s heat bag. He changed into his sleepwear and propped himself up on the bed with the many large pillows at his back. He placed the bag on his weary knee and sighed as he felt the heat immediately begin to penetrate and sooth. He glanced around the rather spacious and ornate room. The bed could easily accommodate three adults and had half a dozen large pillows. There were no curtains as it was a private room. The other furnishings, including an armoire, desk and night tables were made of finely crafted woods that were highly polished. As the heat seeped deeper and deeper into his leg he felt the miles catch up with him and within half an hour he was asleep.

Professor LeMond had requested Harry to conduct several sessions for his DADA students. The first was to be similar to the very first he had given during his seventh year giving an accounting of his

encounters and the outcomes. The professor had indicated in correspondence funneled through Fleur that there was not a great deal of information available on many of his activities and even for the most famous, or infamous as Harry saw them, the accounts received in France seemed to contain as much fancy as fact. The second was to be a series of practical exercises along the lines of the session that Professor LeMond had witnessed and the last would be several small classroom sized discussions with various years in attendance. He also invited Harry to sit in as an observer for some of the regular classes.

His first morning was one of these observation periods and with Fleur providing a whispered translation Harry watched and listened as Professor LeMond delivered a masterful, to Harry at least, lecture and discussion recognizing the effects of various curses based on the reactions of the cursed. The Professor had just begun to discuss the lack of visible effects of 'Avada Kedavra' when he suddenly stopped and looked at Harry with obvious embarrassment and discomfort. Harry looked at the Professor and nodded his encouragement and gestured that he should continue. As the Professor continued on Harry watched the students, many of whom were stealing furtive glances in his direction. When the professor completed his discussion he looked over at Harry as did the entire class.

"If I may, le Professor?" Harry asked through Fleur.

"Oui, Monsieur Potter," he replied.

With Fleur translating Harry began,

"I can confirm what the professor is saying is true. Victims of the Death Curse show no sign of having been cursed other than perhaps looking surprised. Muggles tend to attribute death to heart seizures or being frightened to death," he said. "I suppose, however, that some of you may be curious about this," he said pointing to his scar.

Several students nodded as Fleur completed the translation. Harry proceeded to describe what Professor Dumbledore had explained to him all those years ago. With a smile he said,

“Why the reaction between the Death Curse and whatever ancient magic my mother released through her sacrifice left this scar, I’ve never found out. But what I can say for certain is that I’m able to be here and speak with you today because of a mother’s love for her son. That might be the most powerful magic of all.”

Later that day Harry delivered his first lecture to a packed amphitheater that appeared to contain the entire student body. Harry was beginning to worry that Fleur was going to wear out her voice translating continuously for him and anyone who was speaking to him. In this instance he had no need to worry. Thanks to a marvelous enchantment placed on the room Harry could speak in English and the audience would hear the instant translation in French. So he gave his presentation much the same as he had that first night at Hogwarts and the invitation to ask questions at the end opened up a floodgate.

It was evident to Harry that indeed many of the tales of his adventures and misadventures had been distorted and he spent a fair amount of time ensuring the students that the version he had just related to them was indeed how things had transpired. Fortunately, the true versions didn’t seem to disappoint anyone. One young witch, no more than a second year, had asked if he had been scared during his encounter with the ‘altered’ dragon. Harry smiled at her and said,

“Not then, no, because I didn’t really have time to be. Too much was going on at once. But every time I think about what happened I get a cold shiver up my back. Like right now,” he said and he visibly shuddered, which got a laugh from the audience.

Things took an unpleasant turn the following day. A small lunch had been arranged so that Harry could interact with the faculty without all the students present. Professor LeMond officiated and Fleur was there to translate. Introductions were made and pleasantries were exchanged and all appeared to be going well through the meal. As tea and coffee and desert were being served a wizard who appeared to be in his late thirties with a tall wiry build approached Harry from one of the other tables and spoke,

“Excusez-moi, Monsieur Potter. My name is Giles Fromage, Charms Professor ‘ere at Beauxbaton. You ‘ave gone to great lengths to, ‘ow

you say, correct misimpressions about the stories we 'ave 'eard about you. One wonders if the same should be done about your reputation as a master of the wand, eh?"

Harry looked up at the tall wizard from his chair. He could feel the tension rise around the table. From the corner of his eye he could see the disdainful looks on the faces of some of the other professors and since the Charms Professor was standing just behind Fleur he could see her tense up. With a less than sincere smile he replied,

"That would be difficult for me to say, Professor. I wasn't aware that I had any kind of reputation at all where wand use is concerned."

"Assurement, Monsieur," the professor replied. "We 'ear that you are perhaps the finest in all of Grande-Bretagne, Great Britain."

The tone indicated that this was considered a less than paramount honor. Before Harry could reply Professor LeMond broke in and Fleur translated through an obviously false smile.

"Professor Fromage is renowned throughout Europe for his skills as a duelist. 'e never loses," Fleur concluded.

"Dueling, I see. I'm afraid we never did much in the way of dueling at Hogwarts. I only ever did it once and that was as a second year. We tended to concentrate on the more practical applications," Harry said and then in an uncharacteristic jab to the jugular he continued. "My adoptive mother, on the other hand, seems to be quite a fine duelist. She out dueled one of Voldemort's Death Eaters and killed her. It seems that all the time using her wand in the kitchen and around the house really honed her skills."

"Outrageant!" the wizard exclaimed. "You would compare the skills of an 'ousewife to that of a true duelist?" he sputtered.

"As I said, my experience with dueling is very limited. All I know is that she was in a fight for her life and she won by out dueling her opponent. That tells me something."

“Per’aps if your experience is so limited you would care for a lesson, a very pointed lesson,” Fromage said as his hand began to slip inside his robe.

Professor LeMond began to protest but Harry held up his hand to stop him.

“Understand something, Professor. As far as I’m concerned if someone draws his wand on me, I assume he intends to do me harm and I react accordingly. Do you think you’re ready for that?” Harry said with his green eyes fixed on the taller older wizard.

Their eyes stayed fixed on each other a moment longer and then the older man moved with lightening speed to draw his wand. Just as the wand cleared the folds of the wizard’s robe Harry said softly,

“Expelliarmus.”

The wand kept coming and continued in an arc as it left the wizard’s hand and flew across the room as the taller man staggered back a step. Harry then muttered,

“Immobulous.”

The French Charms Professor froze in place, except for his eyes which were glaring down at Harry.

“Wingardium Leviosa,” Harry said to finish things.

The professor drifted up about six inches off the floor. Harry stood up and moved to within a step of the other man. Around him the small dining room had gone completely silent. More than one professor was staring wide eyed and open mouthed. Fleur, well aware of her ‘brother’s’ abilities was trying very hard not to break out in a huge smile. Her sister had told her about the Charms Professor when he first arrived the previous year and while some were quite taken by his dashing nature and good looks, anyone with some perception could see he was a swaggering braggart who never failed to use his admittedly superior skills with a wand to satisfy his towering ego.

“You see, Professor Fromage, one thing that I’ve learned is that no matter how good you are there is always going to be someone, somewhere who is better or can do something differently that can get the better of you. I guess one part of my reputation that you hadn’t heard about is that I don’t need to use a wand all the time. Like I said, to me, using a wand isn’t about sport or showing off, it’s about using a practical tool that sometimes can save your life,” he said and then turned to Professor LeMond.

“My apologies, le Professor. If you don’t mind I think I’ll ask Fleur to take me on a tour of your magnificent grounds. I’m meeting with the Fan Club this afternoon and I’d like to be in a better mood when I meet them,” he said with a strained smile.

Professor LeMond merely nodded and smiled a bit in return. Harry then offered his hand to Fleur and assisted her from her seat. With a flip of her long silvery hair she took Harry’s arm and they walked slowly out of the room.

Once they were clear of the palace and walking amongst the wonderfully sculpted greenery and colorful flowers Fleur began to laugh, a low throaty chuckle, a sound Harry wasn’t used to hearing. He looked over at her and she wore an unusually nasty smile and an evil glint in her eye. The unpleasant side of her veela heritage was coming through like he had never seen before.

“Are you alright, Fleur?”

“Oh, oui, ‘arry. Never better, mon ami,” she replied. “Gabi has written to me many times and ‘as often mentioned Professor Fromage. When ‘e first arrived everyone thought he was so magnifique. But soon eet became clear to many that ‘e was a rather nasty man with a big ego and always sought to show off with ‘is wand. You ‘ave never taught a better lesson to a more deserving student, ‘arry. I imagine that Madame Maxime will ‘ave some very ‘arsh words for embarrassing ‘er and Beauxbaton this way.”

Again she laughed that nasty little chuckle and gave Harry’s arm a tight squeeze. Harry could only laugh a bit himself. When the time came for the meeting with his fan club Harry was in a decidedly better

mood. A large classroom had been set aside and when Harry entered with Fleur all the students stood up as they did whenever Madame Maxime entered a room. Harry knew that a lot was riding on this meeting for Gabi and he was going to do everything he could to see that it went well. As president it was Gabi's task to formally greet Harry and she did so with the traditional brief hug and kiss on the cheeks. Harry responded by saying,

"Bon jour, Gabrielle," and he wrapped her in a hug and kissed her forehead.

Gabi went bright red, then white, then red again. She giggled a bit into Harry's shoulder and when he released his hold on her she stepped back with a huge smile. Harry thought she must have the entire male population of the school in thrall. She then indicated the floor was his so he turned and faced the room full of students.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'm very happy to be here and to meet you all. I have to say that when I first found out about your club a couple of years ago I was very surprised, pleasantly surprised, that you were doing this. The present that you gave me for Christmas that year is hanging on the wall in a special place in my house in London," which it was, right next to his framed get well parchment. "I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do here with you today, so I guess it's up to your president to help me through this."

As Fleur finished the translation he could see the many smiles at the idea that their present had been given a place of honor in his home. The last statement seemed to push a button for Gabi and she was soon arranging her schoolmates for a group photograph and then each member was introduced and Harry shook hands with the wizards and kissed the cheeks of the witches. Each presented some personnel item that Harry obliged to autograph and then he sat and chatted and answered questions. Some of the students had a fair-to-good command of English and for those that didn't their classmates would offer the translation. This afforded Fleur the luxury to just sit and watch. While it was obvious to her that Harry wasn't reveling in all the attention she could see that he was doing a wonderful job of setting aside his usual reticence for this kind of attention and giving of himself to these young people in the name of family. Her smile was

soft and warm and nothing like what she displayed at the thought of what awaited Professor Fromage.

As the hour for dinner approached Gabi brought the meeting to a close and suggested they all proceed to the Dining Hall together. So it was that Harry led the small parade with Fleur and Gabi on either side and the rest of the club spread out behind them. Since he had spent most of the afternoon in relaxed conversation with the students his leg wasn't bothering him much so he could move at a better pace and was just carrying the cane. Once inside the Hall the students split off to make their way to their places at the tables with many words of thanks and wishes for a pleasant evening for Harry. Gabi was the last to take her leave saying,

"Merci, bother 'arry. This 'as been a wonderful afternoon, yes?"

"Yes it has, little sister. I enjoyed it a lot. Thank you," he said and gave her a one armed hug around the shoulders.

Gabi blushed red to the roots of her hair, giggled a bit and then recovered and with some show of dignity made her way to her table. Her arrival ignited a great deal of conversation. Harry just smiled and shook his head and went with Fleur to the head table. They were the first to arrive so Harry could watch as the room filled. As newly arrived students took their seats near their club member classmates he could see quiet but animated discussions take place. This all came to an end as Madame Maxime and the faculty arrived. All the students stood until Madame Maxime arrived at her massive chair at which time she indicated they should sit. She remained standing and as she towered over Harry she looked down and said,

"Monsieur Potter, I believe Professor Fromage 'as sometheeng 'e wishes to say to you."

It was obvious that the Headmistress was trying to disguise the anger she was feeling. From behind her came the tall wizard. Harry politely focused his attention on him.

“Sir, I weesh to apologize for my actions earlier. I ‘ave no excuse and ‘ope that the experience does not deeminish your regard for this Academy, eet’s staff and students.”

Harry kept his green eyes fixed on the face of the apologetic wizard and while there was no break in eye contact Harry could see subtle shifts in expression that suggested the apology was not so sincere. Without changing his own expression and pitching his voice so it wouldn’t carry beyond those around him replied,

“It’s a funny thing about apologies. Quite often the words don’t reflect the real feelings. But out of my deep regard for this school in general and Madame Maxime specifically I’ll assume this isn’t one of those times. I would hope, however, that you might consider what happened today and decide to use your skills to improve the capabilities of your students instead of your own reputation. As for me I officially consider this episode forgotten.”

As he concluded his comment he extended his hand and after a moment of hesitation the professor took it and as they shook he looked away from Harry towards the floor. Then he turned and walked to his place at the table. Madame Maxime looked down at Harry and said quietly,

“Merci, ‘arry. You ‘ave been most gracious. This ‘as been very embarrassing.”

“I understand, ma’am and like I said, I consider it done and forgotten,” he replied with one of his half smiles.

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully if you consider being served a bewildering variety of foods cooked to perfection uneventful. At one point Harry leaned over to Fleur and whispered,

“Is the food always like this here?”

“Dining ees taken very seriously ‘ere, as eet ees een all of France,” she said with a smile. “But I think they ‘ave, ‘ow you say, stepped eet up a bit for you.”

“Well, I appreciate that but it makes me wonder how you managed to go through seven years here and still come out looking as good as you did,” Harry said, then realized what he said and started to blush.

Fleur looked at him wide eyed and then began to giggle which turned into a poorly executed attempt to stifle her laughter which then had Harry laughing as well. Madame Maxime chose not to notice since she was relieved that Harry was in a good mood after what had occurred. The laughter died away after a moment and the meal concluded without further incident.

There was no activity planned for Harry after dinner so it was suggested that he might like to visit the faculty lounge where he could relax. Harry found it to be an amazing place, just like the rest of the palace. Large, high backed, deeply cushioned chairs were arranged around the room in small groups as well as some that were more isolated. Fleur was permitted to accompany Harry as his interpreter. When he entered there were perhaps half a dozen teachers already seated and although they all acknowledged his arrival no one invited him to sit near them. He and Fleur took seats towards one side of the room. Harry found the chairs to be incredibly comfortable. The room was warmed, even on a spring day by two fireplaces. Harry was reveling in the feel of the chair and was seriously considering asking where they had been made when he heard his name being called.

“Monsieur Potter?”

“Over here,” he called out softly.

A short, portly, elderly witch bustled over to where Harry and Fleur sat and came to stand in front of them. With Fleur translating she introduced herself as Madame Chevalier, the Academy’s healer and Madame Maxime had asked her to see if she could offer Harry any help with his leg. Harry asked if they needed to go someplace and she said they could take care of things right where they were. Harry indicated that she could begin. The healer pulled up a padded ottoman and sat down in front of Harry.

While Harry and Fleur watched she took her wand and as Harry had seen before she made passes over his leg and knee while mumbling

incantations. Harry could feel strange tingling sensations that ranged from chills to heat to goosebumps. The healer then put the wand away and placed her hands so that the fingertips touched lightly along each side. She closed her eyes and began to mumble again. To Harry's surprise he could feel strange spasms in the muscles as if the nerves were firing at random. Then she opened her eyes and pulled her hands back. She sat back on the ottoman so she could look at Harry's face. She looked over at Fleur and asked a question.

"Madame Chevalier asks if you would permit 'er to touch your scar, 'arry."

"The burn scar or the one..." and he made a motion with his hand to his forehead.

"Oui, 'arry, the one on your fore'ead," Fleur replied softly.

He nodded to the healer to go ahead. With the gentle hands of an experienced healer she brushed his unruly bangs aside and laid the tips of the first and second fingers of her right hand on the infamous scar. She closed her eyes and began to mumble again when without warning the scar on Harry's forehead flared for the first time in years and more strongly than he could remember. His head snapped back into the cushions of his chair back and he heard the healer exclaim and then curse in French. Fleur gasped and grabbed Harry's arm and asked,

"Mon frere, are you alright, 'arry?"

Harry's eyes popped open and he could see the healer sitting back on the ottoman holding one hand cradled in the other. Fleur turned on the healer and snapped out a phrase in French. Harry looked over at his 'sister' and asked,

"What did you say?"

"I asked 'er what the 'ell she thought she was doing," Fleur said heatedly.

Fleur turned and to Harry it seemed that she was again demanding an explanation. He could see that the other occupants of the room had their attention fixed on the trio. The healer began to speak and Fleur translated.

“She says she apologizes. She did not expect to get such a strong reaction. When she was touching your knee, she was attempting to magically ‘eal your injuries.”

Harry shook his head and said,

“The doctors at St. Mungo’s said that too much time had passed for magic healing to work.”

Fleur relayed this to the healer. Madame Chevalier shook her head and then began to speak again.

“She says that may or may not be true but when she tried to ‘eal you she felt something odd, like you were pushing back. That ees why she wished to touch your scar. She attempted to ‘eal eet and you pushed back, ‘ard, very ‘ard,” Fleur said.

The healer talked more and Fleur appeared to ask her to repeat what she said. Fleur looked at Harry and began to speak, but more softly.

“Madame Chevalier ees aware of your past, ‘arry. She knows about your mother and the ancient magic she released. Eet would seem that the magic ees still working.”

“I don’t understand, Fleur. I have had all kinds of healing potions used on me and Dr. Medford and the others don’t have any trouble using their magic to examine me,” Harry said.

This was relayed to the healer and she began to speak again.

“She says she believes the magic ees such that eet works against someone trying to change you, ‘arry. To kill you, injure you, that ees a change, oui? So ees ‘ealing eet seems. Potions are not the same as spells and examining ees not changing. Thees ees what she believes.”

“Well, please tell her that I appreciate her trying and I hope my ‘pushing back’ didn’t hurt too much,” Harry said.

Fleur delivered Harry’s comments and the healer smiled at him and patted him on the knee as she stood up and left the faculty room. Harry slumped back in his chair and looked over at Fleur.

“Just when I think I’m getting a handle on things, something like this comes up. I guess I’ll need to check with Madame Pomfrey. I know I’ve had different potions but I don’t know if she’s ever tried a healing spell,” Harry said and then shuddered.

“What ees the matter, ‘arry? You look like you just swallowed a bug,” Fleur asked.

“I was just thinking about the time I had to drink Skele-grow potion in my second year. It was horrible stuff,” he said with a grimace.

“Why did you need that, ‘arry?”

“You never heard that story, Fleur?” Harry asked, surprised.

He proceeded to tell the story about the bewitched bludger, his broken forearm and the botched healing job by Gilderoy Lockhart.

“So Madame Pomfrey gave me Skele-grow potion to drink and I wound up spitting the first mouthful all over the place and had to swallow a second dose. Very nasty stuff.”

“Gilderoy Lockhart? That name sounds familiar, ‘arry.”

“Yeah, he was a very famous author that became our DADA teacher in the second year,” Harry replied.

“Oh, oui, yes, I remember now. Bill told me all about ‘im. ‘e was a big fraud with a bigger ego. Brother mine, you do seem to attract the most unusual people,” Fleur said with a smile.

“Yes, I do, but unusual isn’t always bad,” Harry said looking over at Fleur and giving her a little smile. “I’m feeling kinda tired now, Fleur. I think I’ll go to my room, put that heat bag on my leg and try and get a good night’s sleep.”

“Oui, ‘arry, that’s a good idea, I theenk,” she said as she stood up and offered Harry her hand to help him stand.

When he was standing she hooked her arm in his and with nods to the faculty members they left the lounge. Fleur walked him to his door and with a kiss on the cheek wished him a good night.

The door swung open and Kreacher bowed Harry into the room. His sleep clothes were laid out on the bed and the heat bag was placed next to them. Harry nodded and thought ‘unusual isn’t always bad’. Within minutes he was laying on the bed, propped up and the heat bag working its magic on his now sore leg. As it had in the past, the heat of the bag lulled Harry into that place between fully awake and deep sleep. The dark behind his eyes lightened to gray and he heard a familiar voice call to him.

“Sir? Can you hear me, sir?”

“Abigail? Are you asleep, too?”

“Yes, sir. I’m in the Ravenclaw common room. It was a busy day and I still get a little tired early if I’ve been busy. Are you ok, sir?” Abigail’s voice asked.

“Not too bad, little one. Why do you ask?”

“I thought I felt a sharp pain a little while ago. I thought that something might have happened to you, sir,” her voice said softly.

“Well, something unusual happened,” Harry replied and he proceeded to explain the events with the healer.

“Wow, sir, that’s amazing. Do you think that might be why you were able to see your mum the last time we did this?”

“What do you mean, Abigail?”

“Well, sir, I remember you talking about how you were able to see into old Voldemort’s mind and I figured if maybe the magic that your mum released trying to save you might be having the same kind of effect,” the soft voice said thoughtfully.

“Maybe, little one. I don’t know but it is something to think about,” Harry replied, then he was taken by another thought. “Abigail, would you do me a favor?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Would you send Ginny an owl and let her know we had this little chat and I said everything is going fine and I should be home late in the day on Sunday. I’ll have lots of interesting stories to tell her.”

“I’d be glad to do it, sir. When I wake up I’ll do it right away and send it tonight,” Abigail replied happily. “In fact I think I’m starting to wake up now. Good night, sir. I can’t wait to see you again, in person.”

“Good night, little one, and thank you,” Harry said, noticing the end of Abigail’s last statement seemed to come from farther away.

He received no reply so he assumed the girl had or would soon awaken. He allowed himself to drift about in that gray place for a while until he slid deeper into sleep. He woke up around midnight and found that the bedcover had been pulled over him. He put the heat bag on the night stand and climbed more fully under the covers and was soon back to sleep.

Thursday was to be a big day. Professor LeMond had set things up so Harry could repeat the session that the French DADA teacher had witnessed at Hogwarts and prompted the invitation to Beauxbaton. After breakfast Harry was once more in the large amphitheater where he delivered his lecture on the integration of the various aspects of magic as they pertained to fighting the Dark Arts. He fielded some questions and one in particular illustrated one of the differences between the two schools. A witch, most likely a fifth year, indicated that at Beauxbaton they are taught that diplomacy and negotiation

are important elements and she wondered if any attempts had been made in dealing with Voldemort.

“I’m not familiar with all the details of what went on before I was born as he began his campaign to take over about a dozen years before my first encounter with him, but by the time I was aware of what was going on I think things had gone beyond the point where diplomacy would have been of much help,” he said with a wry smile. “I admit I don’t know a lot about diplomacy and negotiating but it seems to me in order for it to be successful both sides need to be ready to stick to whatever agreement they come up with. Voldemort wasn’t about to accept anything less than his total domination of our magical community and the complete suppression of any non purebloods. Not a very diplomatic point of view, I’d say. This was a fight, and to the death as it turned out,” he finished.

They all left the amphitheater and went to a large ballroom down the hall that had been set up in similar fashion to the Room of Requirements and Harry and Professor LeMond watched and participated as needed while the senior students conducted exercises for the younger students. Harry provided a number of tips and pointers and in one instance prevented a potentially dangerous accident. A fifth year wizard was attempting a charm but his wand technique was extravagantly overdone in what was apparently a poor imitation of Professor Fromage and if allowed to continue would have resulted in a severe hexing of one of the senior students. Harry patiently explained that someone as gifted as the Professor could get away with the more theatrical style but most wizards, himself included, needed to keep things simple in order to get the proper results. The idea that Harry ‘kept things simple’ seemed to make a great impression on the young wizard and on his next attempt his wand work was tight and controlled and accurate.

After lunch, as had been done before at Hogwarts, the senior students were treated to a bewildering variety of exercises that pushed them to their limits. Harry was surprised at the extent that Professor LeMond had gone to for this session. It was made clear about half way through the afternoon when he was informed that unknown to the students this was going to serve as the practical

portion of their NEWTs and OWLs equivalents. Next week they would only have to complete the theoretical sections.

The results were generally excellent. All of the students had been challenged to the maximum and most performed well above standard. It seemed that the combined influence of not wanting to look bad in front of the 'famous', if not legendary, Harry Potter, and not wanting to embarrass the school before a foreign visitor was enough to extract the last measure of performance from the students. All were dirty and sweaty, some were singed and a few required treatment by the healer but the looks on their faces reflected their pride in jobs well done. As the session came to an end Harry took the opportunity to express his admiration for their efforts.

"Before we bring things to an end I just wanted to tell you I'm very impressed with all of you and I think you did a terrific job during both sessions today. I'd be happy to have any one of you working on my team."

The last resulted in a number of smiles and more than one thoughtful look.

"Also, Professor LeMond asked me to inform you that this afternoon's session will serve as the practical portion of your exams," he said with a smile.

This got a number of ragged cheers. This was one group of very tired students. Professor LeMond dismissed his students and as they filed out he gave Harry a companionly clap on the shoulder and smiled broadly.

Friday was given over to more class observation and participation with the younger classes. Harry particularly enjoyed a session with a class of first years. Their enthusiasm and curiosity was contagious and Harry was in a particularly good mood as the day progressed.

Saturday, Harry's last full day at Beauxbaton, promised to be an interesting one. Harry had been invited to attend a Quidditch match and offered the opportunity to be the guest referee. He was a little reluctant at first but after he thought about it a while he decided to

accept. The game was scheduled to commence at ten in the morning. Harry had been lent a set of flying robes, a whistle and a Firebolt broom. Harry promised himself he would take it easy; after all, the game was about the Quidditch flyers, not him. He was assured that language would be no problem if he stuck with the international standards for hand signals and phrasing.

At the appointed hour the two teams, one in blue, the other in green, were assembled, hovering above the pitch, the stands crowded with students. Unlike the Hogwarts stadium, there was only a single VIP section, which was raised above one side of the stadium and slightly lower than its English counterpart. When Harry saw all was in order he released the snitch, bludgers and quaffle and the match was on. Harry went to a middle altitude to keep an eye on the action below. It was immediately clear that one team, the green, clearly outclassed the other. Their chasers were dominating the action with smooth ball handling and superior flying skills. The opposing team in blue had one advantage in that their beaters were larger and stronger and their use of the bludgers as offensive weapons was masterly. A number of green scoring attacks had been broken up with well placed bludger assaults. He also watched to see how the seekers were doing. Apparently the snitch was well used and cagey and had the two seekers trailing after it in almost hopeless frustration.

Harry returned his attention to the action below in time to see the first foul of the game. Obviously annoyed at the way the beaters of the blue team were breaking up scoring drives by the green, a green beater intentionally rammed one of the blues from behind disrupting his attempt to stop a green scoring attack. Harry whistled the game to a halt and flew down to hover in front of the offending green beater. He signaled illegal contact, negated the green score and awarded a penalty shot to the blues. The green beater looked indignant but Harry's green eyed stare forced him to temper his outrage at being penalized. The green fans shouted their displeasure while the blues bellowed in approval. After the successful penalty shot play resumed. Harry was kept busy as the brute force of the blues battled the skilled work of the greens. Penalties were not infrequent; it was a tough battle.

The match was about an hour old when a significant event took place. The snitch had been playing with the seekers, dragging them all over the pitch from high altitude to ground level and had taken its toll on the usually smaller, lighter framed flyers. The blue seeker was tired and this likely led to her unfortunate meeting with a bludger at about ten feet above the pitch. The impact was enough to knock her off her broom and land with a thud on the grass below. Harry whistled the game to a halt and dropped down to her side. The portly healer was bustling out from the stands and came to kneel on the seeker's other side. A quick examination indicated that she had suffered rib injuries but nothing dangerous. Madame Chevalier helped her stand and walked her off the pitch. Harry signaled for a substitute and he saw a blue blur speed into the air. He got back into the air and he got a closer look at the substitute seeker. It was another witch, perhaps a third year astride a broom that looked a great deal like a Nimbus 2001 but made by another company, most likely one here on the continent. She flashed Harry a huge grin and then slipped on her game face. Her look of determination was almost frightening. Harry signaled for resumed play and he was amazed at how fast the new seeker was off the mark.

She was hot on the trail of the sneaky little snitch and left the green seeker well behind. Harry had never been able to determine exactly but he always suspected that part of the little golden orb's enchantment was to sense the flyer chasing it and ratchet up its performance appropriately. The buzzing ball went into a frenzy of changes in direction, speed and altitude. The substitute blue seeker was stuck on the snitch like glue and while Harry would have loved to watch longer he was forced to pay attention to where most of the action was occurring. Perhaps the greens sensed a change in fortune with the new blue seeker but they were in a panic trying to score goals but it was too little too late. A huge roar from the blue section of the stands signaled the end. Harry looked up and saw the little blue seeker holding the snitch high in the air as she made a tight spiral in his direction. He whistled the game concluded.

Harry hovered and waited for the seeker to come to a stop in front of him and offer him the snitch. He took it from her and her face exploded into that huge grin again. Harry smiled back and said,

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Potter. I am so glad I ‘ad the chance to fly today.”

“I may be wrong but I think I’m looking at a future seeker for the French national team,” Harry said.

The young witch’s eyes went wide and her grin slipped to a look of awe and then snapped back again.

“Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Potter,” she said breathlessly.

“Come find me this afternoon. I’d like to talk flying with you if you would.”

“Oui, yes, I most certainly will,” she said and then floated off to join her teammates to celebrate their upset victory.

Harry landed and walked into the dressing area and he returned the flying robes and broom. Fleur was outside waiting for him when he was done.

“Hi, Fleur.”

“ello, ‘arry. You did very well today. Everyone was commenting ‘ow you kept the game under control. It was expected to be a very tough match.”

“Yeah, it could have turned into a brawl, that’s for sure. Did you see that substitute seeker for the blue team? She was incredible wasn’t she?” he asked excitedly.

“Oui, ‘arry, she could grow to be almost as good as you.”

“Almost? Come on, Fleur, she was unbelievable,” Harry said.

“arry, ‘arry, ‘arry,” Fleur said shaking her head. “Geenny ‘as a saying about you. She says you are so cute when you are so clueless. Believe me when I tell you she is very very good but she still ‘as a

ways to go to reach your level. No, no. Do not argue. I am 'ungry and it's time for lunch. Come along."

Harry and Fleur walked along to the Dining Hall in silence. He wasn't sure why but he knew that Fleur was upset. When they arrived Harry noticed someone was at the head table that he didn't recognize from the school staff. Madame Maxime waved him over.

"Harry. That was an excellent job today. Thank you for being our referee. Now I would like to introduce you to Monsieur Pierre LeClerq. 'e ees the Minister for Magical Law Enforcement 'ere in France. 'e wished to meet you."

"Minister LeClerq, it's an honor to meet you, sir," Harry said extending his hand.

"Merci, Monsieur Potter. The 'onor ees all mine. We 'ave 'eard much about your efforts to reform your department een your Ministry of Magic. I found the story about the smugglers most disturbing. 'ave you 'ad any success een determining what their full plan was?"

"Not beyond that they were from Belarus and the material was from all over Europe, and parts of Africa and Western Asia. I'm hoping there will be more information when I get back. Are you having problems here?"

"Some strange items of contraband 'ave been showing up 'ere and there. I'm 'oping that we can arrange some form of cooperation in this case," the French Minister said.

Harry nodded and said,

"I'll be in the office on Monday. I'll talk to my boss and the Director for International Cooperation about making arrangements."

"Excellent. Many thanks, Monsieur Potter."

Madame Maxime shooed everyone to their seats so that lunch could begin. Fleur sat quietly to Harry's left and Minister LeClerq was on his right and the two 'cops' kept up a running discussion on current cases,

the problem of contraband and ideas for increased cross channel cooperation. Harry had a thought and said,

"I don't know if you were aware, Minister, but yesterday Professor LeMond and I conducted some practical exercises and I was really impressed by how well the students did. I even suggested I would be happy to have any of them working for me. I wonder if we could work that out."

"How do you mean?"

"Since I graduated from Hogwarts I've been conducting sessions there with the DADA classes. My boss feels that's been very important and he even suggested that we have internships for the students between their sixth and seventh years. I was wondering if we could make arrangements to expand that between our two countries. Student interns from Hogwarts and Beauxbaton. Even exchanges between our two departments. Learn from each other; establish contacts and that sort of thing. What do you think?"

"I think it's a tremendous idea, Monsieur Potter. I will bring it to the attention of the High Minister of Magic when I return on Monday."

"I too think it's an excellent idea, Harry. I will discuss it with our governing board and make contact with Headmistress McGonagall. You know we had hoped that reviving the Triwizard Tournament would increase cooperation but we all know how that ended," Madame Maxime said.

"Well, it did bring us something special," Harry said turning to smile at Fleur who returned a brief but frosty smile, her eyes still hard and causing Harry to mentally, if not physically, flinch.

Harry's attention was brought back to the Minister when he heard,

"Monsieur Potter, I am pleased that we had this chance to talk. I am sure we will have many more discussions and I look forward to our future cooperation."

“Hmmm, yes, sir. I’ll make sure to get things moving from my end starting Monday,” Harry said with a smile offering his hand to the Minister.

As the diners at the head table began to disperse Harry was about to say something to Fleur when the blue team flyer hurried up to them.

“Monsieur Potter, if you ‘ave the time, please, perhaps we can ‘ave the talk you mentioned now?” she said respectfully but with obvious excitement.

“Oh, yes, sure. I’d just like a moment with Mrs. Weasley here. I’ll meet you over by your table, how’s that?” Harry asked.

“Oui, yes, that would be fine. I will wait for you there,” she said with a bobbed curtsy and then she hurried away.

“Fleur, I’m not sure what I’ve done to upset you but I think we need to talk about it. Can we, after I’m done here?”

“Why do you theenk I am upset, ‘arry,” Fleur asked, the tone of her voice already providing the answer.

Harry just gave her a ‘look’ with his eyebrows up and a slight tilt to his head.

“Oui, alright, ‘arry. I will be outside in the garden. Come to me there when you are done ‘ere. And ‘arry. Remember that that girl ees ‘oping for some guidance from the ‘famous ‘arry Potter’. Be ‘er teacher, not ‘er fan,” she said and with a flip of her hair she turned and walked out of the dining hall.

Harry watched her walk away, shaking his head and wondering what stupid mistake he had made this time. He turned around and walked towards the nearly empty dining table where the third year seeker sat expectantly. Whatever was going on with Fleur she was right about one thing, the youngster would be hoping for some pointers from Harry. He smiled as he took a seat across the table from her.

"Perhaps we could start with you telling me your name and how long you've been flying," Harry began.

"My name is Collette Dubois and I've been flying ever since I was able to sit on a broom. My mama and papa flew for their 'ouses 'ere at Beauxbaton and they got me started early," she said.

Harry nodded.

"My dad was a flyer as well; he was seeker for his, our, house at Hogwarts. But I didn't start until my first year," Harry said.

"Oui, yes, sir. I know all about your flying at 'ogwarts for Gryffindor 'ouse. Every seeker at Beauxbaton knows these theengs."

"Really? I hadn't realized that," Harry said, fighting down the blush he felt rising.

"Oh, yes, sir. I was 'oping, sir, that you might have seen enough of my flying to perhaps make some suggestions for improving?" she asked expectantly.

"Well, Collette. I didn't get to see a great deal since you finished off the game fairly quickly," he said with a smile that had the third year smiling and blushing. "Let me see what I can recall. This should take just a minute."

Harry closed his eyes and let the later portion of the match run through his mind. He could see Collette zip out into the stadium, the wide grin, the game face, then her taking off after the snitch. He watched with his minds eye as she followed after the snitch matching it move for move and then he saw it. He saw the flaw in her technique that if not dealt with would prevent her from moving to the next level. His eyes opened and he saw the girl staring at him intently.

"It's something I do to help me recall things I've seen. It's kind of like watching the event over again," Harry explained.

"It was a leetle strange to watch, sir. I could see your eyes moving back and forth under your eyelids," the girl said breathlessly.

Harry smiled again and said,

“Ok, well it’s obvious that you are very quick and agile in the air and possess a lot of speed. But what I saw was this, Collette. You are a reactive flyer. When the snitch makes a move you match it and your speed and agility allows you to stay with it and eventually catch it. But if you grow much bigger your likely to lose some of that edge. You need to learn to anticipate what the snitch is going to do next and make your move before it does.”

“How is that possible, Monsieur Potter. I thought the snitch was enchanted to be unpredictable,” Collette said anxiously.

“That may have been the intention, Collette, but it doesn’t exactly work that way. I have to admit that some of it seems to be instinct, a skill you’re born with. But from what I’ve experienced and what I’ve learned from others there are things to look for. Have you ever heard of Charlie Weasley from Hogwarts?”

“Oui, ‘e is well known as a great seeker, nearly as good as you, sir, or so they say,” then her eyes popped open. “Mrs. Weasley? Was that...?” she tailed off.

“No, Fleur is married to Bill Weasley, Charlie’s older brother. I’ve know Charlie a long time. The Weasleys sort of adopted me. But anyway, he and I have talked a lot about being seekers and there are some things you can look for that give clues as to what a snitch is about to do. Do you have anything to write on and with?”

Collette nodded and she produced a bag from under her bench and took out parchment, quill and ink. Harry began to dictate a list of things to look for in a snitch’s behavior that would help the girl take her game to the next level. When he was done he said,

“Knowing those things will help, Collette, but in the end it’s about practice and more practice. You have to spend a lot of time chasing after that pesky little ball so that you see as much as you can of its behavior. That’s when it will get to be almost automatic.”

“Oh, yes, sir. Merci, this ‘as been wonderful,” the girl said happily and then looked down at the table and then back up a bit apprehensively. “May I ask one more favor, please?”

“Sure,” Harry replied.

She reached into her bag and brought out a copy of the Daily Prophet that contained the article about Harry playing in the blizzard and crashing into the tower. She slid it across to Harry.

“My aunt is a witch married to a muggle. They live in England and she subscribes to the Prophet. She gave me this copy. Would you please sign it for me?” Collette asked quietly.

“I’d be happy to, Collette.”

Harry took the offered quill and ink and wrote the following in the margin above the story.

“To Collette, hoping to see you fly for the French National Team some day soon, Harry Potter.”

He handed back the pen and ink to the girl then slid the paper across the table. She looked at what he wrote and that huge grin exploded across her face again. She looked up at Harry, wide eyed.

“Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Potter. This ‘as been a wonderful day,” the girl enthused.

“You’re very welcome, Collette. Good luck,” Harry said, and then with a sigh said, “Now I need to go find Mrs. Weasley and find out what stupid thing I did to get her mad at me.”

Collette frowned, “You could not ‘ave done sometheeng stupid, sir.”

Harry laughed.

“I’m afraid I manage to say or do something stupid on a fairly regular basis, Collette. It comes with being human I think,” he said with a rueful smile as he stood up.

He reached across the table to shake hands with the young seeker and then began his trek to the garden for whatever grief awaited him. He walked in the garden for a bit and then found Fleur sitting on a stone bench that looked out over an extensive flower bed that was a riot of spring color. It was obvious to Harry that she was still upset from the tense nature of her posture as she sat. The sound of his footsteps got her attention and she looked up at him. While not the nasty veela tinged expression that he saw when she was contemplating Professor Fromage's fate it did remind him all too well of the look she gave him that Christmas eve when she threatened to strangle him for going out against the three would be housebreakers alone. With a sigh he walked over to the bench and sat down next to her. He looked out over the flowers for a moment and then looked over at his 'sister'.

"Ok, Fleur, what stupid thing did I do this time that has you so upset?"

She didn't answer at first, but continued to look out over the flowerbed. Then without turning to look at him she said,

"I do not know eef eet was sometheeng stoopid or not, 'arry. But what 'as me upset ees sometheeng you do more and more. When we talked about that young seeker you made eet seem like you thought she was nearly as good as you are. I thought not. I watched her and yes she ees very good but she has a long way to go to reach your level of flying. As usual you seemed to be pulleeng yourself down and eet makes me angry."

"What do you mean, pulling myself down?" Harry said, perplexed.

"'arry. We are a very close family, yes? Especially where you are concerned. We all know about your moments of doubt. The times that mother Weasley 'as come to you to talk you out of your dark moods. 'ow you question whether you deserve what you 'ave or can you cope with the work you 'ave to do. And I begin to wonder eef you do thees so that you can 'ear someone tell you 'ow extraordinaire you are. Then I get angry with myself for theenking that about you. So you tell me, 'arry. Why do you do thees theeng?"

When she turned to face Harry she was looking into a pair of green eyes that could have cut through stone. Most people would have flinched away from that stare but Fleur was equal to the task and glared back at him. When Harry spoke his voice was low.

“You think that I say these things because I want to hear someone tell me how great I am? Is that what this is all about?” Harry said as he stood up and began to pace back and forth in front of the bench without his cane.

After a few circuits he stopped and looked down at his ‘big sister’.

“Do you think that I don’t know what I’ve done and gone through and am capable of doing? I know the story of my life, Fleur. I was bloody there. Let’s go down the list, ok? I was the boy that lived because of the magic my mother’s death infused into my very skin. It might still be there. I then survived ten years of emotional neglect by my so called family until I get my letter to Hogwarts. There I start a career of amazing events to include brilliance on the Quidditch pitch, multiple life and death encounters with Voldemort in various incarnations, and let’s not forget the whole TriWizards Tournament fiasco. Then I spend almost a year trudging around the countryside with Hermione and Ron tracking down Voldemort’s Horcruxes and in the end he and I wind up facing off and I help him kill himself. Which brings me to my stunning seventh year of off-the-chart Quidditch play, teaching so well that the Headmistress wanted to keep me there and then scoring some of the highest NEWT scores anyone had ever seen. Oh and by the way I find out that I can chase a snitch with my eyes closed, did you know about that one?”

Fleur shook her head slightly, maintaining her eye contact with Harry, which was getting more difficult to do under the onslaught of his emotional venting.

“Let’s see, so that brings me to graduation and awards and acceptance to Auror training even though they’d rather I went someplace else. And I’m successful at that and next thing I know I’m the Chief of Law Enforcement and I’m reorganizing the whole department and the fate of the Ministry rides on how well I do. Not to mention pretty much killing a giant mutated dragon single handedly

and nearly killing myself in the process. I dunno, is there anything I'm leaving out about me, Fleur?"

"You didn't mention how compassionate and caring you are, 'arry," Fleur said quietly. "ow you look after your adoptive family, all of us and Abagail and the theengs you've done for all the witches and wizards with your business dealeengs."

"Oh that's right, I forgot. Harry the Serpent Slayer is also Saint Harry. Killing dragons with one hand and raising up the downtrodden with the other," he said as he began pacing again but continued to rail.

"I know all these things, Fleur and obviously you know them, too. But I know something else that I bet you don't. Would you like to know what that is?" he said with some heat.

"Oui," she replied calmly.

"I know that in a dark corner in here," he said as he pointed to his head "that there is a piece of me that is terrified every waking moment that if I start to behave like I know these things I'll have taken the first step on the same path that Tom Riddle took."

This obviously shocked Fleur as her eyes widened and her mouth tightened. Harry didn't notice as he was still walking back and forth.

"Tom Riddle didn't die from the Death Curse, not really. He died from arrogance. He knew how strong and talented he was and he reveled in it. He enjoyed the idea that he was more powerful then just about anyone else and the hold that gave him over other people. Do you know why the idea of your sister's fan club bothers me so much? The Death Eaters were Riddle's fan club, that's why. He thought he deserved their adulation, and their fear."

He stopped and looked out over the flowers again but not really seeing them.

"He thought everyone should do the same. That it was his destiny to rule over all of us and only pure bloods deserved to be able to do magic. What a joke. I'm closer to being a pure blood and I know how

little it really means. Here's something else you probably don't know," he said as he turned and looked at Fleur. "My dad, my real dad, was an arrogant little prat when he was first at Hogwarts. I saw some of the things he did to Professor Snape when he was trying to teach me about Occulemency. He grew out of it over time and turned into a pretty great guy so I'm told, but it makes me wonder how much of that is in here," he said, tapping his forehead. "So, when you hear me saying those things what you're hearing is me pushing myself back away from that path that Voldemort took all those years ago."

He took another walk back and forth, his limp becoming more pronounced.

"So you tell me, Fleur. Am I being stupid?" he said.

"Yes, 'arry, you are," she said quietly.

Harry turned quickly and winced as he had twisted his bad leg as he did.

"How can you say that? Why am I'm being stupid not wanting to got that way," he said angrily.

"Because, mon frere, you 'ave completely missed the point. You tell me that thees Riddle enjoyed the theengs he did and the way eet made 'im feel. 'owever, you are scared to death at the thought of eet 'appening to you and that ees all the difference you need. You know eet to be the wrong theeng for you and that will keep eet from 'appening, 'arry."

Harry flashed back on the conversation he had with Professor Dumbledore after he had rescued Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets. How they talked about his fears of how much he had in common with the young Tom Riddle and how the important difference was that Harry didn't want to follow in those footsteps by begging not to be put in Slytherin. That life was about the choices you made. He looked at Fleur.

She stood up and the look of anger was gone. So was the one of shock. Instead the calm clear gaze of the young woman that had

taken such an intense interest in his well being regarded him. She reached out and brushed away the unruly locks of hair that hung down over his forehead and then ran her hand down his cheek.

"The difference between you and Riddle, 'arry, ees that 'e knew these theengs about 'imself and didn't care what eet meant to other people. You know these theengs about yourself and you care so much about what eet could mean that you are nearly sick with fear. You would never take that first step, mon ami. Geeny tells me that you make the joke that she needs to open the air valve in your 'ead to keep it from getting puffed up. There ees a problem 'ere though, 'arry. There may come a time when you need to take a step een a different direction to do what needs to be done and your fear will 'old you back. That you can not let 'appen," she said, looking deep into those green eyes.

"How do I know the difference, Fleur?" he said softly.

"By talking, 'arry. To Geeny, to me," she said with a small smile. "You have Mum and Dad Weasley and your brothers too. You 'ave 'ermione and your friends as well. So many people who would do anything to 'elp you."

He looked at her a long time and then simply nodded and gave her one of his lopsided grins and shrugged a little. She laughed; the clear silvery tone full of joy and love. She spread her arms and stepped forward to sweep him into a tight embrace which he gladly returned. Unfortunately Fleur leaned into him a little too hard and he yelped as he left knee buckled.

"Mon Dieu, 'arry, I am so sorry. Seet down," she said apologetically as she helped him to the bench.

"It's my own fault, Fleur. Too much stomping back and forth," he said.

"Can I get you anything, 'arry?" she said anxiously.

"No, but I know who can," he said, then to the air he said, "Kreacher, I need your help."

In an instant a pop announced the arrival of the house elf.

“Master Harry calls?”

“Yes, Kreacher. Would you please get my heat bag from the room?”

“At once, Master Harry.”

By the count of five Kreacher had returned with the blessed bag. Harry took it and placed it on the aching knee. He let out a sigh as the heat began to seep in and he looked at those big sad eyes and said happily,

“Thank you, my friend. You’re always there when I need you.”

Kreacher looked back and said,

“Riddle would never call a house elf ‘friend’.”

Harry just smiled and Fleur, who had her arm around Harry’s shoulder to offer some support, tightened her grip. Kreacher squatted down next to the bench wanting to be at hand if Master Harry needed something. After a few moments Harry turned his head a little towards Fleur and said,

“I’d like to ask you something, Fleur. It’s something that Abigail asked me a little while ago.”

“Oui, ‘arry, ask.”

“Why do you care so much? About me I mean.”

Fleur laughed a bit and then looked out over the garden. Then she said,

“When I was a young girl just starting at Beauxbaton and convinced that I was perfect,” she said with a laugh that Harry shared, “I was sure that I would do great theengs and I thought I was well on my way when I entered the Triweezards Tournoi. But eet didn’t turn out so well but then I met Bill and my thoughts turned een another direction. But then I learned what you were all trying to do by fighting

Riddle and, 'ow you say, 'is gang of thugs. That was something important and I did what I could and I deescovered sometheeng about myself. I was good at taking care of others."

"Yes, you certainly are," Harry replied.

"To put eet simply, 'arry, eet ees your job to protect the world from dark magic. Eet ees my job to protect you from the world and when necessary, from yourself."

Harry leaned away from Fleur and turned fully to look at her. She looked back calmly with one eyebrow raised as if to invite a comment or question. Harry just smiled and said quietly,

"Maybe I don't have so much to be afraid of after all."

Harry's Future, Part 15

Harry was happy to feel the train come to a stop. He was home. His trip to Beauxbaton had been successful on several levels and he was very satisfied with the results. He had high hopes that a good relationship had been established with the Academy and that that relationship would grow to include Hogwarts and the Law Enforcement departments of both the British and French Ministries of Magic. Perhaps most importantly he and Fleur had come to an understanding of sorts in terms of their relationship and the impact each had on the other's life. Harry had been thinking about that a lot as he traveled back to London. His gradual integration into the Weasley family had given him an education in the theoretical aspects of family life but the practical reality was still something he was struggling with. He didn't have any trouble with the idea of giving to others. He was still having some difficulty dealing with the part where others gave to him. The effects of growing up with the Dursleys made this a somewhat foreign concept even now.

Harry struggled with his bag as he had to rely heavily on the cane as a result of twisting his bad knee the day before. He knew a car would be waiting for him outside but it was still a ways to go. He was in for a pleasant surprise as he stepped out onto the platform.

"Harry! Harry!" a familiar and welcome voice called out.

Harry looked around and caught sight of a wealth of red hair and he broke into a big smile. He took a few steps forward and put his bag down as Ginny bore down on him. Fortunately the crowd emerging from the train slowed her down so she was only at a walking pace when they made contact. She wrapped him in a tight hug that he returned with one arm. She could feel him leaning on the cane. She looked up at him.

"Harry, is the leg bothering you?"

"I'm afraid so, sweetheart. I managed to tweak it a bit yesterday. It should be alright in a day or two," he said with a lopsided smile.

“The car from the Ministry is right outside. I’ll take your bag and you lean on me,” she said as she took the bag in one hand and wrapped her other arm around Harry’s waist.

He could have made the walk unaided but after a week apart he wasn’t about to suggest she let go of him so they made their way cautiously toward the exit. As they walked Ginny told him about getting the message from Abigail.

“It was wonderful to hear how you were doing, Harry. But it was kind of spooky at the same time. Have you made any progress at all in finding out how this is possible?” she asked.

“Not that I’m aware of yet. I’m hoping that Milligan will have something for me when I go in tomorrow. Dr. Medford is going to do an examination when Abigail gets out of school and that might help explain some things. I have a lot more to tell you about what went on. It turned out to be a very productive visit.”

By this time they had reached the Ministry sedan and the driver, in his nondescript black suit, opened the rear door for them.

“Welcome back, sir,” he offered.

“Thanks, it’s great to be home,” Harry replied.

They sat in the back seat with Ginny pressed up against Harry, holding on to his right hand with both of hers.

“Guess what, Harry. I got my first article published in the Prophet this week. They’re calling it ‘Inside the Game’ and I’ll write one a week and we’ll see what kind of response comes in. I’m really excited about it,” she bubbled.

“I don’t know, Ginny,” Harry said with mock seriousness. “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to handle being married to a celebrity.”

She leaned away from him a little to look at his face and then gave him a poke in the ribs. Then she reached up and gave him a quick kiss. She snuggled back against his side and they soon reached the

Black house. Ginny insisted that she carry the bag and as they approached the door, it swung open and Kreacher bowed them inside.

“Welcome home, Master Harry.”

“Thanks, Kreacher. It’s great to be back.”

Harry and Ginny sat at the table in the kitchen while Kreacher finished fixing dinner.

“So tell me all about it, Harry. What was Beauxbaton like?”

Harry proceeded to describe the palace, the students and teachers as best he could. Ginny thought the idea of the perpetual ice sculptures and the gardens was wonderful. He then talked about the sessions with the students and the lectures.

“I’m sure they were very impressed with all you had to tell them, sweetheart,” she said.

“I don’t know about impressed but they were certainly interested. I spent a lot of time answering questions,” he said and then laughed. “It was amazing how some of the stories got jumbled up. Except for that one professor the whole week was really great.”

“What professor, Harry? What happened?” Ginny asked.

Harry told her about his encounter with the Charms Professor to include the apology in front of Madame Maxime and her comments.

“Oh, Harry. I wish I could have seen the look on his face when you levitated him. But I think you handled that very well. You taught him a good lesson in a very subtle way. I bet he wouldn’t have come near you if he had seen what you did to that mannequin that day in Charms class.”

Then he told her about his introduction to the Harry Potter Fan club and how that had worked out. She had started out giggling when he began the tale with the discovery of the pins and how the club had

grown. By the time he was done she was looking at him from across the table with a funny little half smile.

“You know, my love, I’ve watched you very carefully over the years as we grew up and considering what a shaky start you had when it came to girls,” she said with a little laugh, “you’ve certainly learned how to treat women. And I don’t mean it like you were a girl chaser or something like that, because I’d feed you to the grindylows if I thought that. You just seem to know what’s important and what to do to make us feel happy and cared for,” she said reaching across to take his hand and give it a squeeze.

Harry shrugged and gave her one of his lopsided grins and said,

“Maybe, then again maybe not. Fleur and I had a bit of a dust up yesterday afternoon. It turned out alright in the end but it got pretty serious for a while.”

“What happened, Harry? Is it something you can tell me?” she asked anxiously.

“Of course, no secrets between us, remember?” he said and then began to recount the discussion Harry and Fleur had the day before in the garden.

Ginny’s eyes grew troubled and misty as she heard Harry talk about what he revealed to Fleur in response to her question about why he always seemed to talk himself down. She nodded when she heard what Fleur had to say in response, particularly the last part about it being her job to protect him. Harry finished by describing how Fleur had helped support him as they walked back into the Palace for the farewell dinner. When he concluded he sat with his hands folded on the table looking across at her face that was now looking both serious and determined.

Without speaking she stood up and walked around the table to stand at his side where she took his head in her arms and cradled him to her. Harry wrapped his arm around her waist and held her tight, not sure what she was trying to convey. After a moment or two she

released her hold and took his face into her hands and turned his head to look up at her.

“She’s right, you know, although I’d never call you stupid. You would never, ever take that first step. It’s just not part of who you are. It’s like I was just saying before about how you treat people. Despite the way you were raised and how you were treated for so long after you got to Hogwarts you still give and give and give. Listen to me, my dear man. You would never go that way. And even if that impossibility were to happen, those who love you would do whatever it took to bring you back to your senses, even if it meant holding you down and beating you with a stick,” the last said with a loving smile.

Hearing that Harry began to laugh and then he pulled her head down and gave her a long lingering kiss that spoke volumes. When they separated Ginny continued to look down at her hero.

“Fleur was right about something else, Harry. You have the potential to do great things. You can’t let this sort of thing get in the way of that. What a tragedy that would be.”

With a last kiss she went back to her seat and they finished their dinner with Ginny peppering Harry with questions about the Quidditch match he officiated. He included his discussion with the young seeker.

“See, Harry. I told you that day with Abigail that you’d be a great flying teacher. Of course it might come back to haunt you one day.”

“What do you mean, Ginny?”

“Well, imagine if she does become the seeker for the French National Team and they play the UK and win. She gets interviewed and it comes out that you were the one who taught her how to be a better seeker. Think how bloody popular you’d be then,” she said with a laugh.

Monday morning found Harry at his desk in his office looking at three messages. One was from the Director requesting Harry to come see

him as soon as he got in. One was from Milligan requesting time to see Harry and the last was from Maxwell also requesting time. Harry knew that he wanted to talk to Milligan first but he would have to wait until last, protocol being what it was. So he grabbed his cane and made his way up to the Director's office.

"He told me to send you right in, Mr. Potter," the secretary said.

Harry nodded then knocked on the door and stepped in.

"Ah, Harry. Come in and sit down. I see the leg is still a problem," the Director said.

"It comes and goes, sir. It was doing pretty well and then I twisted it a bit on Saturday. I go for therapy tomorrow so that should help get things back on track."

"Good. Now, I'd like to hear about your trip to France. Anything we should be concerned with?"

"Yes sir. A great deal in fact," Harry said.

He then began to lay out the conversation he had with the French Minister and Madame Maxime about cross channel cooperation and trading interns and agents. The Director's head was nodding as Harry talked.

"Excellent," he said when Harry finished. "I couldn't be more pleased, Harry. The international scope of the smuggling operation alone warrants this kind of arrangement but I'm particularly happy with the idea of the exchange agreements. I'll take a walk over to see Percy Weasley when we are done and start the ball rolling. How did your DADA sessions go?"

"They seemed to go well, sir. I got a lot of questions and that's usually a good indicator of interest. The last session was similar to what you saw that afternoon and Professor LeMond used it as the practical portion of their exams. That's when I made the comment about having any of them come to work for me. There were some very sharp wizards and witches there."

The Director laughed and said,

“Well, don’t be surprised if you get some applications in French this summer, Harry. Great work. I know you’ve got a lot to catch up on so I’ll let you get to it, but we’ll be talking more about this soon.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied and then he got up and walked out of the room.

His next stop was Maxwell’s office. He knocked on the doorframe and stuck his head in.

“Anyone home?”

“Oh, there you are, sir,” Maxwell said. “I would have come see you if you had sent a message.”

“I was just on my way back from the boss’ office so this is just as easy,” Harry said as he eased himself into the other chair in the tiny room. “So what’s been going on?”

“The Patrollers are on schedule with training. We had a couple of minor incidents that we took care of. A couple of kids trying to shoplift in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley. They practically ran right into the Patrollers on duty. Bit of a problem in Hogsmeade. A couple of roughnecks out of the wilds in town and we had to Stupefy them. So it looks like we’re earning our pay so far,” he said and Harry simply nodded. “We’ve continued with the interrogations and background checks on that lot from Belarus. They’re a tough bunch of nuts to crack but we are making some progress. Mysteries has taken over on that dragon business so we aren’t likely to hear too much about that anymore.”

“I wouldn’t count on that if I were you,” Harry said with a little grin.

Maxwell just smiled and said,

"That new assistant of yours has been a big help. Since you were gone I put him to work on a few small tasks I've been meaning to get to. He should be in to see you sometime this afternoon."

"Maybe you need an assistant yourself," Harry said.

"I don't think so, sir. If I can borrow Medford now and again I'm good."

"Ok, anything else?"

"No, sir, that's pretty much it for now."

"Great, thanks for taking care of things while I was gone. Would you find Milligan and have him come see me?" Harry said as he stood up.

"Yes, sir," Maxwell said and Harry turned and left the little office.

Harry was in his office no more than ten minutes when the lanky head of the Magical Investigation Unit arrived. Harry waved him in after the knock.

"So, did you come up with anything?"

"Oh, you could say that, chief. Take a look at this," Milligan said as he unrolled a long piece of parchment onto Harry's desk.

"I've spent a fair amount of time these last few weeks going through church and county records, even a few cemeteries. It looks like the magical ability is all down through the young lady's maternal side. Take a look at this name," he said as he pointed to a spot on the complex diagram which read Cassandra Trelawney.

Harry let out a whistle and said,

"That would explain some of it."

"Yup, but there's more. It seems that Cassandra had a least one daughter that was a squib. She then married another squib. It's from those two that Miss Westwood descends. But if you look back up the male squib's line you see at least three other names that were

reputed to be lesser or greater mentalists of one form or another. It looks like the combination of talents seemed to combine and then go into hiding or something then emerged in the girl. Now, keep going and see what name you come across."

Harry followed the lines upward until he came to a name he knew very well. He looked up at Milligan.

"Yes, sir. You are descended from Ignotus Peverell and she's descended from the brother, Antioch. That could be and is most likely the connection you were looking for."

"How did you know I was descended from Ignotus," Harry asked.

"We did a pretty thorough background check on you, sir, when we heard you were going to apply," Milligan said matter-of-factly.

Harry sat back in his chair. So the connection between he and Abigail was blood. It was a distant one but there none the less.

"Is this the only copy?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll hold on to it if you don't mind. This isn't the sort of thing I'd want to be too well known," Harry said quietly.

"I thought so. I did my best to make sure none of my contacts knew too much about what I was digging into," Milligan.

"Thanks and good work. I appreciate it, more than I can say."

Milligan just nodded and left the office. Harry leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. The information formed a foundation for what was going on as far as Abigail was concerned but it certainly didn't fill in many of the details. Most probably would never be known.

Harry was kept fairly busy dealing with the exchange proposals that he had discussed with the Director. Regular meetings with the International office were held. Percy told Harry one afternoon after a

meeting had broken up that some of the old timers in the International Office were mightily offended that a 'young whelp and rank amateur' had created the opportunity for such a bold initiative but since their acting director wasn't likely to welcome any attempt to push him aside they had to resign themselves to the situation. Harry could only laugh and wish Percy well in dealing with the old guard.

He took a trip up to Hogwarts and had a chat with Professor McGonagall about the idea of exchange students and the idea of interns for the Ministries.

"I must say, Harry. For only having been there a week, you certainly have created some excitement. I received a message from Madame Maxime the Monday after you returned and she was very complimentary about your conduct there. I think she hopes to make your visit an annual event. She also mentioned that you were very gracious about a particularly embarrassing episode but didn't offer any details. Could you tell us what happened?"

Since they were meeting in the Head's office the 'us' included the former Heads' portraits, nearly all of whom were wide awake. Harry blushed a bit and then began to tell what had occurred with Professor Fromage. Harry could see that Professor McGonagall was doing her best to maintain a straight face but as Harry neared the end of the tale she did smile a bit when one of the portraits muttered,

"Deserved it all and more, bloody Gallic magician."

Professor Dumbledore coughed and made to look up over his head and said,

"My dear sir, we all know how you feel about losing to Beauxbaton in the TriWizards Tournament but that was well over three centuries ago and all in all the young man was treated quite admirably."

This was greeted by a loud 'Harumph' but no more Francophobish comments were forthcoming. Dumbledore looked down at Harry and said,

"I must say, well done, Harry, my boy. The whole reason behind restarting the Triwizard Tournament was to foster greater cooperation but you have gone well beyond my greatest hopes."

"Thank you, sir. It was a great experience and I wouldn't mind going back."

"Just you remember, Mr. Potter. Your Alma Mater has first call on your talents," Professor McGonagall said with a severe look.

"Yes, ma'am. I understand," he said holding back a smile.

They discussed the ideas for a while more. Then Professor McGonagall said,

"Harry, it's getting close to lunch. I'd like you to stay and then afterwards you can have your talk with Ms. Westwood. Will you be able to share what you discovered with us afterwards?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd be glad to but I thought Abigail should find out first and in private," Harry said.

"We understand completely, Harry. Let's head down to the Hall before the crush starts."

Harry was moving better after repeated therapy and exercise sessions and the cane was becoming less necessary. He continued to take stairs carefully because he was worried about a twist or misstep setting him back. As they walked into the Hall a few students were there and they waved to Harry and as he passed he shook hands or grasped a shoulder and smiled or offered a word or two of greeting. When he took a seat at the head table he looked around the Hall and smiled. It was always good to come home.

The noise level in the corridor rose noticeably as the students arrived and began to fill the tables. He saw a familiar head of dark hair bobbing along with a group of other students and he continued to watch until eye contact was made. Abigail broke into a huge grin and rushed up to the dais and then up to the table.

"Hello, sir. It's great to see you again, in person I mean," she said in her airy voice.

"It's great to see you, too, little one. I have to say you look much better than the last time I was here. I see you've been eating well."

"Yes, sir. I've regained all the weight I lost and added a pound or two," she giggled.

"Well, I've some things to tell you so would you meet me back here after you've finished your lunch?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir," she said and then dashed back to her seat.

Harry could only smile. Dealing with her condition that day had been one of the hardest times of his life and for him that was saying something. Seeing her happy and healthy again made it worth the effort, however. The meal passed as they usually did, with a steady buzz of conversation from the students with the occasional laugh ringing out. Harry had enjoyed his time at Beauxbaton but he had to admit that he much preferred this aspect of life at Hogwarts.

It didn't take long before Abigail was finished and making her way back to the head table. Harry stood up and met her at the steps and motioned her to join him. Together they went into the anteroom behind the head table and sat down at a small table that might have served for a game of cards. Harry reached into his robe and pulled out the large parchment that Milligan had prepared. Harry had folded it several times so it would fit. He spread it out on the table so they both could see.

"Abigail, in an attempt to find out something about your talents I had one of my investigators look into your background. Remember all the questions that you were asked during that first meeting with Professor McGonagall and the portraits of the former Heads?"

She nodded, her eyes big and bright and fixed on Harry.

"Well, I thought we could find out more and we did. Take a look. This is you," Harry said as he pointed to a name at the bottom of the sheet.

He let his finger trace upward as he spoke.

“Here’s your mom. Your magical ability seems to come down through her side of the family, we believe. Here’s the first name that got our attention. Cassandra Trelawney. She is very famous for being a gifted seer, someone who can make predictions of the future.”

“Does that mean I’m related to Professor Trelawney, I’ve heard about her,” Abigail said.

“Yes, you’d be some kind of cousins. Unfortunately, the professor didn’t inherit much of a gift from her ancestor. She’s only made two valid predictions that I know of. Now things get a bit more interesting. If you look at the name of the man that married Cassandra’s daughter and then trace backwards several people in his line are also known to have possessed mental powers of one form or another. It would seem that maybe that combination has brought us to you,” Harry said with a smile.

Abigail was fascinated by what she was seeing and hearing. The idea that she was connected to all these people was incredibly interesting. Harry began to speak again.

“Now we come to the next part of this question, Abigail. Why you and I seem to have some form of connection. As we track back through all of these people we come to these three brothers. You are descended from this one. I am descended from that one.”

Harry heard a little gasp and he looked over and saw those big dark eyes looking back at him.

“So you and I are related? For real?” she said breathlessly.

“Yes, we are. It’s distant but it’s there,” he said with a big smile.

“Oh, sir,” was all she could get out past the rapidly rising tears.

“There is something you should know though, Abigail.”

"Yes, sir, what is that?" she asked.

"Do you see the third brother there, named Cadmus?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tom Riddle descended from him," Harry said quietly.

"You and I are both related to Voldemort?" she said, her eyes going very wide.

"Yes, we are. It's not something I like to talk about but I thought you should know. I don't think you have to worry about it though. I don't see you going over to the dark arts," Harry said with a gentle smile.

"No, sir, I wouldn't ever do that," she said very seriously.

"I'm sure you wouldn't. There's something else I wanted to talk to you about. You know it's my intention to have you come to the Black house in London for the summer, right?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I had a talk with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley a little while ago and we found a problem with that plan. No, no. Don't worry, you're still coming home with Ginny and I. But since during the day we'll both be working you'd be there alone so it was suggested that you spend the day with the Weasleys, Mrs. Wesley mostly, and then come back to London when one or the other of us get there. What do you think?"

"Well," she began a bit apprehensively, "what is Mrs. Weasley like?"

"Well, I think she's just about the best mum anyone could ever hope for. Whenever I've felt bad she's been there to make me feel better. She's the best cook I know. I think you'd have a lot of fun being around her and the Burrow has lots of room and there's also a lot of space for you to fly your broom which you wouldn't have in London."

"It sounds ok, I guess..." she trailed off.

“What’s the matter, Abigail? Talk to me,” Harry said.

“It’s been hard, sir. After my mum and dad died I had to go live with my grandparents and get used to that. Then I came here and had to get used to that. Then I was going to go with you to your house in London and that was going to be something new but I thought with you and Ginny it would be kind of fun. Now you want me to get used to two places at the same time. It’s kind of a lot,” she said looking at him anxiously.

Harry looked back at her and took a hold of her hand.

“I’m sorry, Abigail, I didn’t realize this was so difficult for you. Let me think a moment here,” Harry said as he sat looking at her.

Then an idea occurred to him.

“What about this, Abigail? If I can arrange it would you like to come to the Burrow this weekend and get to know the Weasleys? Would that help you feel more comfortable?”

“How can we do that in so short a time, sir? I’m not qualified to Disapparate.”

“Have you ever heard of floo powder? That’s how you can travel quickly from one place to another without having to Disapparate,” Harry said.

“Well, if you think that would work, I guess it would be ok.”

“That’s great. Believe me you’ll love it once you get there. The Burrow is one of my most favorite places in the whole world.”

“Ok, sir, I’ll try it and see how it works out.”

“That’s all I ask. So, tell me how school is going. You and I haven’t had a chance to talk about that for a while,” Harry said.

“My work is going good. I lost a little bit of ground when I was sick but I’m all caught up and I’ve been doing some extra work and I’m sure I’ll do ok with my exams. There is something though.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“My magic isn’t very strong,” she said quietly.

“What kind of magic are we talking about, Abigail. You certainly can do some pretty amazing things,” Harry said, trying to encourage her.

“Oh, I know all about that, sir. And I know I’m really good with things like potions and herbology because that’s a lot of memorizing and thinking. I mean with a wand. I know all the charms but I don’t have much power when I do things. If I try my hardest with Expelliarmus it just knocks the wand away from the other person. I can’t levitate anything bigger than a book,” she said looking down at her hands that were clasped in her lap.

“That’s not all that unusual, little one. Some people are good at some things and not so good at others. Some witches and wizards can’t do much with a wand at all, but can do amazing things with potions or magical creatures. With all the special things you can do the fact that your wand work is only average isn’t anything to worry about. With time and practice you’ll probably get better with that, too. Try not to let it worry you.”

Before he could say more the sounds of movement in the Hall indicated that lunch was over. Harry looked at Abigail and said,

“Ok, time for you to get going for your next class. So, if I can get it set up, you’ll come with me and Ginny to the Weasleys on Friday and we’ll see how you like them.”

“Yes, sir,” Abigail said as she got up and began to walk towards the door before stopping and turning around. “I don’t know if I’ve said this before, but thank you for everything you’ve done for me. It’s been a long time since my mum and dad have been gone and it’s hard to remember much about them. I’d like to think that my dad was a lot like you but it’s hard to say. But if I needed to have someone else

there for me, I'm really glad it's been you," she finished with a sad smile and then turned and left the room.

Harry watched as she left, letting a long breath escape. Then he folded the large parchment and went up to see the Heads to let them in on what had been discovered. It was a much longer conversation than the one he had with Abigail.

Harry was as good as his word. With a number of messages and personal requests he got permission to take Abigail out of school for the weekend, and permission to hook the anteroom fireplace to the Floo network for the weekend. Ginny would be able to help with taking her but she had a match on Saturday and then would be free on Sunday. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were very happy to have guests for the weekend. The comment made was,

"Why would you even think you had to ask?"

So it was that on Friday afternoon shortly before dinner was to commence, Harry, Ginny and Abigail were standing before the fireplace in the anteroom dressed for travel. Each wore a long light cloak and hats to cut down on the soot they were likely to encounter; although it must be said that someone, likely a group of house elves, had done an excellent job cleaning the fireplace. Harry suspected that the Weasley's hearth was quite likely to shine.

"Ok, Abigail. Ginny will go first. Remember what we told you. Throw the powder down into the fireplace and when the green flames flare up you say 'the Burrow' clearly and then step in. When you see you've reached the other end, just step out, and don't worry because Ginny will be there to help you. Alright?"

"Ok, sir," she said a little nervously.

"Whenever you're ready, Ginny," Harry said.

"Right, see you there," she said and then threw down the powder, said 'the Burrow' and then stepped into the flames and disappeared.

"Wow," Abigail said with quiet excitement.

“Ok, little one, your turn,” Harry said.

Abigail squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, threw down the powder and as the flames roared up she said calmly ‘the Burrow’ and stepped into the green curtain of fire. As she popped out of sight Harry thought he heard a little squeal but he wasn’t sure. He counted to ten and then followed the same procedure and after the short disorienting journey stepped out into the living room of the Burrow. As he did he was met with a rush by Abigail,

“Oh, sir, that was the coolest thing ever. It was like an amusement park ride but ten times better. I wouldn’t mind doing that every day,” she said looking up at him.

“I’m glad you enjoyed the trip, Abigail. Now, have you had a chance to meet anyone, yet?”

Ginny spoke up.

“No, Harry, not yet so I’ll do the honors. Mum, Dad,” she said turning to her parents who were standing a few steps away, “this is Abigail Westwood. Abigail, this is my mum and dad, Molly and Arthur Weasley.”

“Hello, sir, ma’am, it’s very nice to meet you and thank you very much for inviting me to your house,” Abigail said politely, her voice barely above a whisper.

“We are very pleased to meet you, Abigail,” Mrs. Weasley began. “We’ve heard a great deal about you, of course, but it’s wonderful to finally meet you. And you are welcome here at anytime, dear. Now what do you say we get you out of that cloak and hat.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The three travelers took off their cloaks and hats and as Harry had thought, the Weasley fireplace was practically soot free and they arrived in very good order. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny then escorted

Abigail upstairs to one of the new guest rooms and got her settled in. Then it was time for dinner.

Everyone except Mrs. Weasley took places at the table while she started plates and utensils floating through the air to land precisely on the table. Abigail sat and watched with rapt attention. When everything had been put out she looked at Mrs. Weasley as she took her seat and said,

“That was amazing, ma’am, I bet even Professor Flitwick couldn’t move all that so smoothly.”

“Well, my dear,” Molly Weasley began with an embarrassed laugh, “I don’t know about that, but having done it for so long for this crew I don’t even really think about it anymore. I bet if I did, I’d start dropping things.”

“Nonsense, Molly. You haven’t dropped a plate or a cup in I don’t know how long,” Arthur Weasley said.

The food was as always plentiful and tasty and it was obvious that despite any prior anxiety Abigail was enjoying herself. Mrs. Weasley was looking across the table at her with an appraising eye.

“Harry, I know we’ve talked about the young lady a number of times, but I don’t recall you ever mentioning what a beauty she is,” she said.

Abigail’s eyes popped and she had to stifle a giggle as she blushed bright red. Harry laughed a little and said,

“Well, you know how it is, Mum. With Ginny and all I have to keep those kinds of comments to myself,” he said with a half grin.

He was rewarded with a sound thwack on the arm from his redheaded fiancé who said,

“Yes, and you better remember that, Mr. Potter,” with mock severity and then smiled at him and leaned in to kiss his cheek. “But you are right, Mum. She is a stunner.”

Seeing Abigail duck her head down to hide her face in her long dark hair, Arthur Weasley spoke up.

“Now, now, ladies, let’s not make the young lady uncomfortable. I have to admit you are correct but let’s not embarrass her while she’s still trying to get used to us,” he said with his best fatherly voice.

Abigail looked up at him and smiled; the blush still evident on her cheeks. They ate in silence for a few moments and then Abigail spoke up.

“Mrs. Weasley, Mr. Potter was telling me that he thought you were just about the best cook he ever met. I think he’s right. This is all really, really good. Thank you very much.”

“You’re very welcome, my dear. And thank you, a cook likes to hear that her food is being enjoyed,” she said, glaring around at the members of her family.

“Great dinner, Mum, thanks.”

“Yes, indeed, Molly. Excellent as always.”

“Mmmffff,” was all Harry could manage around a mouthful.

Molly Weasley winked at the diminutive girl who then laughed behind her hand. When they were done with the meal Molly took command.

“Alright, you three settle yourselves in the living room. Abigail and I will take care of this mess, won’t we dear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Abigail replied.

The three adults walked into the living room and took seats. Abigail began to gather up knives and forks but Mrs. Weasley stopped her.

“No need to get your hands dirty, my dear. Try it this way,” she said, holding up her wand.

“Um, I’m not sure about that,” Abigail said. “I thought I wasn’t allowed to do magic outside of Hogwarts, I’m too young.”

“Don’t worry, dear. The Ministry doesn’t bother us out here. Just start small, one fork from the table to the basin. Like this,” Molly said, demonstrating with a wave and a mumbled incantation.

Abigail watched and with a determined look took her wand and followed the expert example. As the fork floated up and began to move to the basin she squinted in concentration and watched as the utensil dropped into the soapy water. She smiled brightly.

“Well done, dear. Let’s keep it going.”

Ginny leaned over to Harry and whispered,

“That’s just how she got me to do it.”

In next to no time the clean up was finished and Mrs. Weasley and her kitchen helper were firmly ensconced on a large, well cushioned couch. Mrs. Weasley looked down at her and then said,

“So, my dear, is there anything you’d like to know about us or the Burrow?”

“Well, Mr. Potter has told me a lot about you all. I remember that night in the hospital wing after he crashed into the tower he told me all about the Christmas you had. That sounded like so much fun. Everyone all squeezed in and presents being handed back and forth.”

“Ah, yes. That was a special Christmas indeed. Harry really outdid himself that year. It’s a lot more comfortable now, which is good since our family seems to grow every year,” Molly said with a smile.

Abigail smiled back and then looked over at Mr. Weasley, her eyes going soft and slightly unfocused. Arthur looked back at her and said,

“Yes, Abigail, are you alright?”

“Yes, sir. I was just wondering. What’s an Anglia?”

The room erupted in laughter and once everyone calmed down Mr. Weasley began the tale of his greatest and most ill fated foray into the world of magicked muggle machinery. Mrs. Weasley chimed in about the rescue of Harry from the Dursleys by the three youngest Weasley brothers and then Harry reluctantly concluded with the story of how he and Ron flew the little car to Hogwarts and what ultimately happened to it.

“For all I know, that little car is still running around inside the Forbidden Forest. I suppose the next time I see the Centaurs I can ask them about it, Dad.”

“Never you mind, Harry. Better it stays where it is,” his ‘mum’ said.

“You almost got expelled, Mr. Potter?” Abigail said, amazed at the idea.

Harry just nodded as Ginny chimed in.

“I know I might be risking ruining the reputation of the famous Harry Potter, but he was on the verge of being expelled several times and had pulled off other capers that if he had been caught he would have most definitely been expelled. He’s quite the rouge, our Harry,” she said with evil glee.

“Hey!” Harry said indignantly.

“It’s ok, sir. I kind of know about a lot of this already. You were mostly doing things that we needed you to do. Just like you do now,” she said with a smile.

“Air valve time,” Harry said in an aside to Ginny.

Ginny hauled off and hammered Harry on the arm so hard he winced as she glared at him. As Harry rubbed his arm he said,

“Alright, I get the message.”

“What’s going on, children?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Fleur and I have decided that we're tired of Harry kicking himself every chance he gets so we are going to remind him of it whenever it happens," Ginny said with a sweet smile.

"A conversation for another time, I think," Mr. Weasley interjected.

"Yes, sir," Harry and Ginny said together and then smiled sheepishly.

"So, young lady, what else would you like to know?" Mr. Weasley continued.

"My dad used to work in his garage a lot, on the car, my bicycle and stuff. Could I see your shop while I'm here?"

"Why, of course, Abigail. I'd be happy to," Mr. Weasley said with a big grin.

A moment later their conversation was interrupted by two pops out in the back yard. Then the kitchen door opened and Bill and Fleur came in.

"In here, children," Mrs. Weasley called out.

"Hello Mum, Dad," Bill replied. "I see your weekend guests have arrived safe and sound. What did you think of the Floo network, Miss Westwood?"

"It was really cool, Professor. I had a lot of fun even if it was a little short," she said looking up at Bill from her seat on the couch.

Harry and Ginny stood up knowing that Fleur would have waited for them so she could bestow her usual hugs and kisses in greeting. When she gripped Harry tightly she felt him wince a bit. She let go and looked at him.

"What ees wrong, mon ami, ees eet the leg again?" she asked, much concerned.

"No, Fleur, I just managed to bruise my arm and it's a little sore," Harry said matter-of-factly.

"Wrong, Mr. Wonderful," Ginny said and then she leaned in to whisper to her sister-in-law.

When they were finished Fleur looked at Harry, glaring at him at first and then her face shifted to a look of regret and she shook her head. Then she looked at Ginny and said,

"We 'ave a ways to go weeth 'im still, eh?"

Ginny just nodded. Fleur then shifted her attention to the guest of honor. Her face lit up in a bright smile that Harry knew all too well and the effect on the girl was not much different then it was on the boys.

"ello, Abigail. I am Fleur. I 'ave seen you at 'ogwarts several times, of course, but eet ees so nice to meet you een person," when she finished she took a step closer and held her arms out.

Abigail bounced off the couch and stepped up to be engulfed in Fleur's embrace. It was an interesting study in contrast. The long silvery hair and outgoing personality versus the long dark hair and quiet reserve. But from the moment they stepped apart it was obvious that they hit it off immediately. Abigail had to look up to meet the taller Fleur's blue eyes but it was obvious to Harry she was enthralled. For her part, Fleur seemed equally taken with Abigail.

"She reminds me of the porcelain doll, yes? I theenk she would geeve my sister Gabi a run for 'er money, as you say," she said with that wide, brilliant smile.

"If she looks anything like you, I wouldn't stand much of a chance," Abigail said airily.

"I don't theenk so but eet ees sweet of you to say. Muum?" Fleur said by way of asking to sit on the couch.

"Certainly, dear, the both of you right here," she said, patting the couch beside her as she moved a bit to one side.

Abigail was bracketed by the two Mrs. Weasleys and looked very content. One small hand was still held in Fleur's and Harry was pleased to see how at ease she seemed. He didn't think that there would be much difficulty getting her to agree to spend her summer weekdays here. Ginny must have sensed his thoughts since she said quietly to him,

"She seems to be fitting in just fine, Harry. I think she'll do ok here with Mum this summer."

"I think you're right, love. It looks like she'll be getting quite a lot of attention from a certain blonde as well."

"Yes, and that might be a good thing. She's what, almost fourteen now? She's so small you sometimes forget about it. Fleur should be able to give her some tips about being a teenage girl," Ginny said thoughtfully.

"You could help her with that too, you know," Harry said.

"Thanks, sweetheart, but let's face it. I was still kind of a tom boy at that age and no one is more of a girl, at any age, than our Fleur," she finished with a smile.

The conversation rolled on for a while with Bill asking Harry about Beauxbaton and then his work at the Ministry and Harry asking about how things were going with the DADA classes and Gryffindor's Quidditch team.

"We're doing well, but there's a big match tomorrow so I'll have to be up at Hogwarts for the day. Fleur was telling me about that seeker you both saw at Beauxbaton."

"Yeah, she was pretty amazing. Very quick, lightening fast and a real competitor. She relies on her quickness a bit too much though. I gave her some tips on how to start anticipating what the snitch will do next as opposed to reacting to its last move. Fleur was the first to notice she needed something a bit more to really be great."

“arry. You were officiating. You couldn’t see everytheeng.”

Fleur was about to continue when her eyebrow went up and she looked down at Abigail. She had fallen asleep and her head had come to rest on Fleur’s shoulder. The blonde beauty had a small smile and her eyes looked strangely soft.

“I theenk our guest ‘as ‘ad a full night.”

“Time for bed for her then,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“May I, Muum?” Fleur asked quietly.

“What? Oh, of course dear,” she replied.

Fleur leaned down and gently prodded Abigail to semi wakefulness and gently led her to the staircase.

“First guest room on the second floor, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said quietly.

Fleur smiled back and led the sleepy girl up the stairs. Everyone turned to Bill who had been watching the scene with a smile on his scarred face. He looked back and said,

“She’s been feeling very ‘maternal’ lately if you know what I mean. I think you’re going to be grandparents and aunt and uncle before too much longer.”

“Well, it’s about time, is all I can say,” Mrs. Weasley said in her best exasperated mother’s voice.

They all laughed. They chatted for a bit more until Fleur came back down and motioned for Bill to come to her. With a ‘I wonder what this is about’ look he got up and went over to his wife who proceeded to talk to him in hushed tones, her hands lightly touching both his forearms. She was looking up at him as she spoke, her eyes questioning. When he apparently agreed to what she was asking her face lit up and she hugged and kissed him. Then she walked over to Mrs. Weasley still holding on to Bill’s hand.

“Muum, Bill ees going to be returning to ‘ogwarts tonight. May I stay and spend the weekend?”

“Well, of course you can, dear. You’re always welcome, you know that. I’m sure Abigail would enjoy having you here.”

“That would be great, Fleur. I have a match tomorrow so I’ll be gone all day and we can’t leave her here with just Harry. He can be such a lump, you know?” Ginny said with a perfectly straight face.

“Hey,” Harry once more had to respond indignantly.

Fleur burst out laughing then had to clamp her hand over her mouth, remembering that Abigail was sleeping just upstairs. The others were forced to stifle laughs as well while Ginny patted Harry’s forearm to sooth his hurt feelings.

“Well, my dears, I think we need to wrap this evening up. Ginny, are you staying or going?”

“Going, Mum. Early call tomorrow. Harry, would you walk me out?” Ginny asked.

“I dunno, is it safe?” he asked looking a bit apprehensive.

“Yes, my hero, it’s safe as long as I don’t hear any more of that nonsense out of you,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said and Ginny gave him a big smile, then hooked his good arm and walked with him outside.

They came to a stop about ten feet away from the back door and Ginny turned and grabbed Harry around the neck and pulled his face down to hers. She pressed her lips hard against his and gave him the kind of kiss that always made his knees go weak. When they separated she looked at him and said,

“I love you, Harry, and I always will but I meant what I said before. No more digs at yourself and no more false modesty. Just honesty, ok?”

“Ok, Ginny. Besides I don’t think I can survive the abuse,” he said with a little grin.

She reached up and gave him another kiss and then stepped back.

“See you here after the match tomorrow, my hero,” she said and then Disapparated.

Harry looked at where she had been standing for a moment and then with a sigh turned around and walked back into the house. Bill and Fleur were still standing and talking with their parents. Bill looked over at Harry and said,

“Alright there, Harry?”

“Yes, sir, Professor Weasley, just fine.”

“Good, it’s my turn to head out. Look after the Mrs. for me, will you?” he said with a grin.

“Um, I thought she was supposed to be looking after me?”

Bill laughed and shook his head, then said,

“It does seem that way. Well, good night everyone, I’ll be back around dinner time tomorrow,” he said then looked down at Fleur. “Walk me out?”

“Of course,” she replied with a smile.

Harry shook hands with Bill then took a seat across from his ‘parents’. Mrs. Weasley looked over at him and smiled.

“Well, Harry, I don’t know about you but I think that went pretty well.”

“I think it went great. She seems to have really warmed up to you and she and Fleur hit it off really well. I think things will work out fine,” he said with a smile.

At this point Fleur came back into the house and came over and sat down next to Harry and took hold of his arm. She looked at him with a small smile and said,

“arry, that ees a most precious young lady. What you are doing for ‘er is wonderful.”

“Yes, she is Fleur. I just hope I’m not stepping over some line with this.”

“What do you mean, son?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“Well, I was her teacher after all. I just hope my becoming her guardian doesn’t cause any problems for her, that’s all,” he said.

“Harry, how could you think that? You were more student then teacher that year,” Mrs. Weasley countered. “You saw a child in need and you reached out to help her. That is never stepping over the line. I can’t imagine anyone making trouble for her. Not more then once anyway,” she said the last with a very unpleasant look on her face.

“Do not worry about such theengs, ‘arry. Do what you feel ees right and you will be doing the right theeng,” Fleur said.

“Well, right now I feel the right thing is to go to sleep. It’s been a busy week.”

“You know which room to take, Harry. It’s all ready for you. Get a good night’s rest and we’ll see you for breakfast in the morning, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said with a smile.

“Sleep well, mon frere,” Fleur said as she leaned over and kissed Harry on the cheek.

He got up and went over to give his ‘mum’ a kiss good night and shook hands with his ‘dad’.

His sleep was deep and dreamless and despite her being only a few dozen feet away there was no connection of their minds. Harry awoke when he heard a banging on his door.

“What is it?”

“It’s time for breakfast, sir. Mrs. Weasley sent me to wake you up.”

“Ok, Abigail. I’ll be down in a little bit,” he said as he stretched and climbed out of bed.

He pulled on a robe and walked to the new bathroom down the hall and got himself pulled together and then back to the room he shared with Ron to get dressed. As he walked down the staircase he was greeted by the smells of bacon, sausage, eggs and fresh rolls. He was much wider awake now and was smiling as he walked into the kitchen. He looked at what was going on and had to smile even more. Abigail was draped with a slightly oversized apron and her long black hair was pulled back and held with a clip. Her faced was smudged with flour and split by a large grin.

“Sir!” she called out and ran up to him and gave him a big hug that left a touch of flour on his shirt. “Oops, sorry, sir,” she giggled and tried to brush the flour away.

“That’s ok, Abigail. You look like you’ve been having fun.”

“Yes, sir. I woke up early and I came down and Mrs. Weasley was just starting to make breakfast so I got to help. I hope you like the rolls. I made the dough,” she said.

“I can’t wait,” he said looking down at her.

“Sit yourself down, Harry. We’ll be waiting just a bit; I’m expecting a few new arrivals this morning.”

“More of the clan stopping by to meet our honored guest?” Harry asked, grinning at Abigail.

“Yes, and I think I hear one now,” Mrs. Weasley said.

She was right. Charlie opened the door to the kitchen and said,

“Good morning everybody. I hope you made a lot for breakfast, I’m starving,” he said as he walked up and gave his mum a hug.

“Yes, there is, dear. Sit yourself down. My assistant and I have been slaving since sun up to make enough to feed this crew.”

“Ah, yes, this must be Abigail. Hi, Abigail. I’m Charlie Weasley.”

“Hello, sir,” she said looking at him, then her eyes lost some of their focus and then she gasped. “Oh, you shouldn’t have gotten so close.”

Charlie blinked and his right hand came to rest on his left forearm. Mrs. Weasley was looking at her second son.

“What have you been up to, young fellow me lad?”

With a crooked grin he replied,

“Same as always, Mum. I forgot that Abigail can see more than what’s plain to the eye.”

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble,” she said anxiously.

Mrs. Weasley laid a comforting hand on Abigail’s shoulder and said,

“Don’t worry, my dear. We’ve long ago gotten use to this one showing up with new burns and scars. He’s managed not to lose any body parts so far so we consider ourselves lucky.”

Charlie laughed and came over to stand in front of Abigail. Unlike his taller, lanky brothers he didn’t loom over the diminutive witch but he still bent a bit as he reached for her hand.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Abigail. I’ve heard a lot about you. I understand you’ve got yourself a pretty interesting broomstick,” he said.

“Oh, yes sir. Mr. Potter got it for me. Regular brooms are just too big for me to handle but this one is special and I really love to fly,” she said breathlessly.

“So do I, little lady, so do I. If you decide to spend some time here during the summer maybe we can get in some flying time together,” Charlie said. “Oh, and you can call me Charlie.”

“I would love that, um, Charlie.”

“Abigail,” Harry began, “while you’re here why don’t you call everyone by their first names? Well, us kids, at least,” he said the last with a smile.

“Um, well I guess I could, sir, um, but there’s you and Professor Weasley. I don’t think that would be proper, would it?” she said shyly.

“Well, you’re probably right about Bill but you should ask him when you see him later. As for me, I’m not really a professor and with you coming to live with me, I think it will be alright. If you feel better about it when we are at school you can call me ‘sir’ but I won’t mind if you use ‘Harry’.” He said kindly.

“Oh, ok, um, Harry,” she said and then turned red and giggled a little.

As Charlie settled himself down at the table there came another pop outside and in a moment Ron strode through the door. Seeing Harry he stopped and with a dead serious face snapped to attention in proper military fashion and saluted.

“Patroller Trainee Weasley reporting, SAH!”

Harry cast a wary eye at his best mate and then decided to play along with the joke. He stood up and came up to his friend and took a walk around him like a Field Marshall inspecting a raw recruit. Since it was Saturday at the Burrow, Ron was dressed in casual clothes, clean but most certainly casual. Harry came to a stop directly in front of Ron and stood with no more than two inches between their noses.

“So, this is what passes for a recruit these days, eh?” he said with mock seriousness. “I’ve seen better specimens in one of Professor Sprout’s preserving jars. And do something about that hair, red.”

The last statement was more than Ron could handle and he began to smile then laughed through tightly clenched lips. Then both he and Harry began to laugh out loud. Ron threw an arm around Harry’s shoulder and said,

“Look who’s talking about keeping his bloody hair in order.”

He and Ron shook hands and then Harry waved Abigail over.

“Abigail, I know you’ve probably seen Ron once or twice but I wanted to introduce you to him, my first and still best friend, well, he and Hermione.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Abigail,” Ron said.

“Hi, um, Ron. I’ve seen you a lot. You know, when I see Harry and the things he’s done.”

“Oh, I can just imagine. It’s a good thing Abigail wasn’t around when you and I were in school, mate. Can you just see Professor McGonagall tapping into all our capers,” Ron said in mock horror.

“Oh, no, I would never have informed on you like that,” Abigail replied.

Ron laughed and gave her a one armed squeeze on the shoulder. Ron then took a seat at the table so he was sitting next to Harry. Mrs. Weasley began directing the platters of food while Abigail carefully directed a fresh baked roll onto each plate. Her large dark eyes were squinting in concentration as she landed each one with great care. The last one landed on a plate in front of an empty chair when the last expected diner arrived.

“Bon jour, everyone,” Fleur said cheerily as she swept into the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley received the first kiss on the cheek and then she gathered Abigail up in a big hug that was returned with great enthusiasm. She then leaned over Charlie's shoulder and kissed his freckled cheek.

"Good morning, brother Charles. You seem to be doing well; the dragons are behaving themselves, yes?"

"Well enough to keep me in one piece, Fleur," he said with a laugh.

Then she moved around the table and made a big fuss over Ron with a two armed hug around his neck from behind and wet kisses on both cheeks. Ron went bright red and nearly froze in place. Harry could hear a low chuckle not unlike the one he heard in reference to the problems of Professor Fromage. Harry knew the angelic looking young woman definitely had a devilish side. Then she straightened up and looked down at Harry who was looking back up at her.

"Harry. Up you come, s'il vous plait," she said with a look that would brook no argument.

Harry stood up and Fleur wrapped her long slender arms around his shoulders and pulled him close. He brought his arms together behind her back and squeezed. Then she pulled back and gave him her customary two cheek and one forehead kiss combination which he returned minus the forehead. She smiled at him and said,

"Ah, Harry you are learning. Just remember, always like that, yes, mon ami?"

"Whatever you say, Fleur."

With the last arrival it was clear that someone was missing.

"Where's Dad, Mum?" Charlie asked.

"Your father left here at the crack of dawn this morning, all very hush hush. He was in his casual clothes so it's not about work, I'm sure. I'd swear that shop of his will contain some kind of car by nightfall," she

said, giving Harry a 'look' that was returned with one of total innocence.

Ron and Charlie could only look at their plates and laugh quietly. The rest of the meal passed very pleasantly. Once everything was laid out on the table Mrs. Weasley and Abigail joined the rest with Abigail sitting next to Harry. Everyone was very complimentary about the rolls and Abigail was having a hard time suppressing a big smile. Once everyone had finished eating Mrs. Weasley said,

"So my dears, what plans do you all have for the day?"

"As for me, Muum, if Abigail 'as no objections I would like to spend the morning getting to know 'er better, 'ave a little girl time as the say," Fleur said, smiling down at Abigail who returned a smile of her own and a vigorous nod.

"I don't know. I'm here to take it easy, so unless you have something for us I thought the three of us could do some flying and Quidditch. What do you think, guys?" Charlie asked.

"Sounds good to me," Harry replied.

"Oh, great," Ron said, rolling his eyes dramatically. "I get to play Quidditch with two of the best flyers every seen at Hogwarts. And worse, one of 'em is my boss."

Harry and Charlie laughed and the three got up to go outside. Abigail insisted that she help Mrs. Weasley first and so she and Fleur pitched in and helped clear the table. Fleur looked at the kitchen door through which the three guys had left and said,

"How did they do that? They go outside and play while we get to do the cleaning up?"

"Oh, don't you mind that, Fleur dear. We all know who rules the roost around here," Mrs. Weasley said meaningfully.

Fleur and Abigail looked at each other and laughed. Outside the 'guys' got down to the business of playing. Charlie had brought his

broom with him, Ron's was stored at the house and Harry borrowed one that Bill had left behind. A battered quaffle was produced and the three walked across to the field. Within minutes they were airborne and taking easy sweeps tossing the quaffle back and forth. None of them had spent any serious time in the air lately so they were just getting the feel back. Harry was riding an old Comet model so it was taking him some concentration but soon he was feeling confident enough to open it up a bit. Charlie and Ron were soon right behind him. It wasn't long before the ladies in the house could hear the sounds of three fliers whooping it up.

Fleur and Abigail were sitting on a couch backed by the bigger of the front windows. They were watching as the three 'boys' chased each other across the sky over the field. Fleur looked down at Abigail and said,

"When the time comes for you, Abigail, make sure you find someone who does not forget 'ow to play. Who remembers that there ees always a boy eeside wanting to come out."

"Professor Weasley still plays?" Abigail asked, amazed.

"Oui," Fleur replied with a gentle smile. "'e 'as seen so much of the bad side of life with 'is job at Gringotts and his time fighting Voldemort yet 'e smiles so much and laughs and enjoys 'is time with 'is students. Eet ees like 'e ees playing all the time. I can only imagine 'ow much fun 'e ees 'aving today with the big Quidditch match."

Fleur looked back outside and said,

"And look at 'arry. Who 'as 'ad as difficult a life as 'e and listen to 'im now."

Then she looked back down at Abigail and took hold of one of her small hands and said,

"So, ees there anyone at 'ogwarts that as captured your attention?"

Abigail turned bright red and giggled. Meanwhile the three fliers continued their antics for a couple of hours, occasionally taking

breaks to hover and chat, but always making sure they stayed below the level of the trees to avoid muggle eyes. They finally came in for a landing and put the brooms away. They pulled up some battered old chairs in the backyard and sat down. Harry looked around, remembering how much time he had spent out here the summer when he was recovering. A thought occurred to him and he looked over at Charlie.

“So has anything more come to light about that dragon I tangled with?”

“No, Harry. I’ve told you all I know. Once the Ministry took control of the carcass I wasn’t privy to too much more information. We were able to confirm that it was crossed with a Basilisk somehow. There is some thought amongst my colleagues that perhaps it was some plot of Voldemort’s to create a dragon that he could control. A dragon is a reptile but it isn’t all that closely related to a snake. Maybe he was trying to get some attributes of a Basilisk mixed into a dragon and then that way he could communicate with it and control it. A very scary prospect.”

“I wonder if Milligan, the head of the investigative unit might be able to find out what’s going on. I’ll have to ask him. How about you, Ron? How’s it going with the training?” Harry asked his best friend.

“I like it a lot, Harry. We’ve been doing a lot of the public relations stuff you wanted and there have been a few situations that we’ve been able to help with, so it’s good.”

“Yeah, Maxwell told me about those when I got back from Beauxbaton. Good stuff,” Harry replied.

Harry nodded. Then Charlie looked at Harry and asked,

“So how are things shaping up for the wedding, Harry?”

“Um, don’t know really. I guess I should ask Mum. Ginny said a while ago that Mum had done a lot already but I don’t really know. I got the impression all I had to do was worry about who my ushers would be. But I don’t know how many I’m supposed to have. I’m supposed to

match numbers with Ginny but she hasn't said yet. Guess we can talk about it tonight maybe. I'd like to have all you guys involved, I just don't know yet."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it too much. They'll tell you when they are ready. Besides, you've already done more than enough just by arranging for the Great Hall. That was brilliant," Charlie said with a smile.

"I guess," Harry said with a smile and shrug.

They talked some more about this and that until a strange noise was heard from down the road that lead to Ottery St. Catchpole. The three looked up and then got up and walked over to the wall in time to see a small black car approaching followed by a cloud of pale blue smoke. An occasional pop would color the blue with black and add an air of decrepitude to the faded looking mass of metal. As it got closer they could see the beaming face of Arthur Weasley looking back at them through the dirty windshield. Charlie could only shake his head while Harry and Ron started to laugh. They watched as the car rolled unceremoniously up to one of the garage bay doors of the elder Weasley's shop. It came to a stop with a cough, a sputter and then a large bang and backfire that produced a small cloud of black smoke that drifted over the yard.

Mr. Weasley climbed out of the car and waved to the 'boys' to come over. The three climbed the low garden wall and approached the vehicle. They could also hear the back door open and the exasperated exclamation from Mrs. Weasley,

"Oh dear, not again."

And the more enthusiastic but only barely audible,

"Oh, wow, what a cool car," followed by the sound of rapid footfalls as Abigail dashed across the yard to the gate and path to the 'shed'.

"So, what do you think, fellas? A 1955 Ford Popular. Kinda rare these days. An elderly patient of the Grangers had it in an old garage. Let it go very cheaply. Hello, there Abigail, what do you think?"

"It's great, Mr. Weasley. My dad's dad had one of these a long time ago. I remember seeing pictures of him with it. Can I sit inside, please?" she said airily.

"Of course. Get behind the wheel and help steer it in while the boys and I push. There you go. Ok fellas fall in behind and give it a shove," Arthur Weasley said as Abigail got behind the wheel.

The Popular was a small car but even so, Abigail had to scoot forward on the seat to grab the steering wheel and see out over the dash. Mr. Weasley put a hand on the wheel and helped steer as the three young men pushed from the rear. Molly Weasley and Fleur had come to stand behind the wall and watch.

"Muum," Fleur began, "Dad needs to play too, yes?"

"Oh, I know, dear, but why couldn't he have taken up gardening or even fishing," Molly Weasley said with a small laugh as she draped an arm around her daughter-in-law's shoulder then turned and went back into the house. Fleur followed a few minutes later.

After an hour or so it took three loud calls to get the rest of them back into the house for lunch. Mr. Weasley already had dirt and dust on his hands, face and clothes and his wife chased him upstairs to clean up. Abigail had managed a few smudges on her face that Mrs. Weasley took care of at the kitchen sink. When Mr. Weasley returned everyone else was seated and was looking towards Mrs. Weasley with some apprehension.

"Well, Arthur?"

"Molly, dear. It's just something for me to tinker with. I happened to bump into Hermione a few weeks ago and she passed on a message from her dad that one of his patients had this old car sitting in a garage on an estate and wanted to be rid of it. I got a very good deal on it. It might even be something that Abigail could help me over the summer."

“Wow,” was all they heard in that quiet little voice.

“You are a senior member of the Ministry. You know how much trouble that flying Anglia of yours caused,” she said sternly.

“I don’t intend on putting any spells on this one, my dear. Simply a tear down and rebuild. You have my word on that.”

Molly Weasley looked at her husband then at their tiny houseguest.

“Fleur gave you some advice about men who play. Just be careful, my dear, about what toys they play with,” she said in pained voice. “Alright, let’s eat.”

Mr. Weasley smiled and winked at Abigail while the rest began serving themselves. Lunch was very good, as usual, and when it was over the mad tinkerer and his young protégé quickly excused themselves. Molly watched as the mismatched pair disappeared through the door. She let out a mournful sigh.

“I think we’ve lost her.”

“Oh, do not worry so, Muum. Een the summertime she will be ‘ere during the weekday and Dad weell be at work,” Fleur said.

“Mmm, yes, you’re right, dear. I guess we should get her a pair of overalls at least so she doesn’t ruin her clothes,” she said with a rueful laugh.

“Um, Mum, while I have you here, Charlie raised an interesting question about the wedding. Is there anything I need to be doing or know about?” Harry asked.

“Well dear, like most grooms you’ll really only need to worry about your best man and ushers. And the wedding rings of course, but you really should work that out with Ginny. All the rest is being dealt with, thank you very much though for asking,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Do you know how many I need to pick? The last time I talked about it with Ginny she was still up in the air about even a maid of honor.”

"I think she said she was pretty sure but we'll talk to her tonight," she said.

"Ok, oh and make sure that whatever bills come in go to me," Harry said.

"Well, now, dear, it's usually the bride's parents that deal with that," Mrs. Weasley replied.

"It was my idea to have this big wedding at the Great Hall. I'm not going to saddle you and Dad with the cost," Harry returned firmly.

"We'll discuss it later, your father, you and I," Mrs. Weasley said trying to head off any unpleasantness. "Now, let's clean up and get the house ready for our dinner guests."

"oo else are you expecting, Muum?"

"Well, George and Angelina, Hermione, and Percy said he's coming and he's bringing someone."

The last comment got everyone's attention. They all knew Percy had been seeing someone but he had been very secretive about it. The fact that he was bringing her to the Burrow indicated it was fairly serious. With nothing better to do, Harry, Ron and Charlie wandered out to see what was going on with the new acquisition. Looking in through the open garage bay door the three could see the bottom half of Mr. Weasley sticking out from the side of the engine compartment and they could hear a muffled conversation.

"Can you see the backside of the ignition switch, Abigail?" came the muted voice of their dad.

The reply was too low to hear. But obviously it was heard by Mr. Weasley, who replied,

"Ok, see if there are any lose wires. Yes, look for any one that is just hanging with the bare end visible."

By now Harry had edged up to where he could look through a side window and he saw the lower half of Abigail on the floor in front of the passenger seat, her upper body hidden behind the dash panel. There was light coming from behind the panel so she must have been using a muggle torch. It looked like she was wearing one of Mr. Weasley's old jackets to protect her clothes from the dust. From where he was Harry could now hear Abigail, if barely.

"Ok, don't touch it. I need to disconnect the battery. I'm going to come around and take a look," Mr. Weasley said and then pulled his head out from under the hood. "Oh, hello fellas. We're trying to figure out why the engine died on me as I pulled up. It looks like the wiring is in pretty fragile condition."

He then knelt down on the floor on the driver's side and leaned in under the dash on that side.

"Yup, that's it. Nice job, Abigail. Thanks," he said from underneath.

When he climbed back out he looked at his three sons and said,

"Ok, boys, lend a hand. I want to pull off the hood and grille and radiator before dinner."

For the rest of the afternoon came the sound of banging, sheet metal clanging and voices from the garage. Just as the sun was setting Bill Apparated into the backyard but his attention was immediately focused on the noise in the garage. He walked over to investigate and when he saw what was going on he couldn't help but laugh. He saw the small black car up on stands. The four wheels and all the front sheet metal had been removed and laid out on the floor of the second bay. Abigail was crouched down by a wheel removing rust with a wire brush. She was still dressed in the old jacket with her sleeves rolled up to half the original length. The bottom halves of two bodies were visible from either side of the car as someone was pulling out the seats. Mr. Weasley and Charlie were examining something on a bench with their backs to the door.

"Dad, what's going on?" Bill called in.

“Come on in, son. Take a look for yourself. I brought this home this morning.”

“Has Mum seen this yet?” Bill asked as he walked past the car, stepping over a pair of legs.

“Yes, she saw it when I brought it home. She’s not happy about it but seems willing to put up with it,” Bill’s dad said with a small grin. “I don’t plan on spelling it at all, so we won’t have any unauthorized flying cars zipping around the skies of Devon. Right, boys,” he said,

Muffled agreements, followed by laughing, were heard from inside the car. Bill turned and looked at Abigail crouched on the floor aggressively attacking the rust and flaking paint on the wheel.

“Hello there, Abigail. Enjoying yourself?”

“Oh, yes sir, Professor Weasley,” she said, looking up at him. “Your dad promised me I can help him with it this summer, even painting it.”

Her dark eyes were bright and her smudged face was split by a bright smile. Bill nodded and returned the grin. He turned back to his father.

“Well, I better get inside and say hello to Fleur and Mum. Oh, by the way guys, Gryffindor won today, three hundred ten to seventy. Another undefeated season.”

Muffled affirmative exclamations came out of the cramped passenger compartment. Bill just shook his head and carefully picked his way out of the garage. The rest had to leave a few moments later as Bill called out from the backyard that they needed to come in and clean up for dinner. He stood there and waited until he saw four taller figures surrounding a much shorter one that appeared to be talking nonstop and with a great deal of animation. He turned and walked back into the house.

“They’re on the way, Mum. It seems like Dad has found himself a very willing assistant. At least someone was clever enough to put one of Dad’s old jackets on her.”

“Thank you for calling them in, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said in a long suffering voice. “And yes, I think you’re right about Abigail. I remember Ginny used to like spending time in the shop with your father until she was able to get a broom to do what she wanted and then it was all about flying.”

She had just finished when the subjects of the discussion trooped through the kitchen door. Ron and Harry were fairly dusty from the waist up while Charlie and his dad had fairly dirty hands. Abigail looked like she needed a good face scrubbing but the oversized jacket had saved the rest of her including her hair which had been tucked down her collar. She was smiling fit to burst.

“What a fun afternoon, Mrs. Weasley. I got to crawl up under the dashboard and then I was cleaning the wheels. Mr. Weasley said he’d teach me all about how a car works. I might even get to do some painting,” she rattled off breathlessly.

Mrs. Weasley looked at her with a smile and said,

“That’s just wonderful, Abigail. It sounds like you wouldn’t mind spending time with us during the summer then.”

“Oh no, ma’am. I wouldn’t mind at all. I know I told Mr. Potter, I mean Harry, that I was kind of worried but not anymore. I’ll be learning how to cook and all about cars and flying and well...” at which point she looked at Fleur and kind of blushed. “It’ll be really great. I don’t know how I can ever thank you.”

Mrs. Weasley’s smile got much bigger and she said,

“I’m so very happy to hear you say all that, Abigail. It will be just as wonderful for us to have you here. As to thanking me, you can do that by going upstairs with Fleur and getting cleaned up and ready to meet the rest of the family. Fleur, dear?”

“Oui, Muum. Come along, Abigail,” Fleur said, holding her hand out.

Harry watched as the two walked up the stairs hand and hand. He looked at his mum and dad and said,

“I can’t thank you enough. I knew that she’d have a place to come to this summer at the Black house. But now I think she’ll be coming home.”

Harry's Future, Part 16

The swirling gray mist surrounded Harry like weightless wool. He knew he was dreaming but he couldn't figure out what he was dreaming about. He had no way of knowing in what direction he was facing or which way was up. He tried to push the mist aside but it simply flowed around his hands in indiscernible patterns. Odd sounds drifted through the strange fog. Muffled voices, mixed with low growls, waxed and waned and bounced around the grayness until they sounded as if they were all around him. Harry was getting annoyed with the growing incoherence of the dream, a dream he should have been able to control after all the work he had done with Dr. Medford and his visualization techniques.

As his annoyance increased the grayness began to take on a pale red tinge. Somewhere in the distance a deep, barely audible rumble began. Harry strained to see through the fog and as if the rumble had started a panic in whoever or whatever else was out there the babble rose in volume.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," Harry thought to himself as he tried to figure out what was out there.

He could feel the anger welling up from deep inside. The fog was getting redder, not unlike the evening clouds had looked that day outside of Hogwarts when he had spoken to Firenze. The rumble was getting louder or closer or both and the panicky voices were now screaming in fear. Harry reached for his wand and couldn't find it as a ball of bright orange flared in front of him. In desperation Harry threw up his right hand like he did when he saved Ginny after she went adrift from the Firebolt. As he was preparing to unleash a spell, drawing in his will, he was jostled and heard his name called. He shook his head angrily and tried again as another bright orange plume flared towards him. This time he was shaken so hard he lost his balance and his troublesome knee gave out. He fell over with a shout and the grey mist dissolved and his eyes flew open as he bolted upright in bed looking around him.

"Harry, are you alright, sweetheart?" Ginny asked from next to him.

“Oh, what? Wow, that was weird,” he said as he fell back against his pillow.

He turned his head to the side and saw Ginny propped up on one elbow, looking at him with a worried look. She reached out to touch his shoulder and pulled her hand back.

“Good grief, Harry, you’re burning up. Are you sick?” she asked.

“I don’t think so, but that was a very strange dream. Even that bunch I had when I was in hospital made a certain sense but this one didn’t make any at all,” he said quietly.

“Tell me about it,” Ginny said as she settled back onto her pillow and draped one arm across his chest, his skin now just warmer than usual.

So Harry began to recount the scenario that had unfolded before his mind’s eye, capturing all the details that he could. Ginny listened without speaking, trying to envision what he had dreamed. When he was done he turned his head and looked up at the ceiling. As he had talked to her she had been able to feel his body continue to cool off. She looked at the profile of his face, softly illuminated by the moonlight coming in through the window. Without his glasses his eyes had a slight squint. She let her hand drift up to touch his face and said,

“That was a bit of a mess. I’d think that rumbling and bright orange had something to do with a dragon. As to the other voices and noises I don’t know. The gray got redder as you got more annoyed, was that right?” she said softly.

“It seemed that way but I don’t know which was which. Was it getting redder because I was getting more angry or the other way around,” he said, frustration plain in his voice.

Ginny didn’t possess the raw brilliance of Hermione Granger or Abigail Westwood, but she was still a very bright young lady who possessed a dogged determination about anything she was interested in. It was one of the reasons she had progressed to being such a stellar Quidditch player. And there was nothing in the world in

which she was more interested than her Harry, as she usually thought of him. From the very first she absorbed every detail about him that she could, at first from a distance and then as time progressed, from ever closer vantage points. At this time in their lives she could read his moods and understand his feelings simply by watching his face; the flicker of an eye, the creasing of his forehead or the way the corners of his mouth would move. Even in the dim light of early morning she read his face like a well worn book.

"How has work been going, sweetheart?" she asked.

"Hmm?" he said, caught off guard. "Oh, alright I guess. We've got the Patrollers shaping up well. The whole cooperative thing I came back with from France has got a lot of attention and Hermione has said she's starting to make some progress with what she's been trying to do," he concluded.

"What about the investigations, the smugglers, that hybrid dragon?"

"The dragon has become something of a non-issue, really. Apparently the spooks in Mysteries have that one all tied up and I doubt we'll ever find out anything unless I gather up the DA again and we raid the place," Harry said with a wry smile. "The smugglers are proving to be a bit difficult to nail down. They were all caught dead to rights with all that contraband material so they'll all go away for some time for that. But they won't give up anything about what the overall plan was or who's behind it. I'm hoping that we can get some help from the French Ministry on that but I didn't get the idea that they had much to go on. They're probably hoping the same thing as I am. I have this feeling that there's much more to it than just someone trying to get rich on bootleg magic but I can't see it and it's frustrating."

"Don't you think that may be it then, Harry? The dream I mean. You feel that something big is out there but you can't see it. All that gray fog is blocking you from seeing who and what's out there. The details are floating around but you can't pull them together and it's getting you frustrated. You believe it's big and dangerous so you picture it as a dragon in the fog closing in on you. As for the red, have you ever seen your face when your temper starts to build?" she finished with a smile.

Harry turned his head to look at her and he squinted so he could bring her more into focus although she was still mostly a blur. Not that it mattered. He smiled and said,

“You really are brilliant, you know that?”

“Please, Harry, I spent my whole seventh year chasing after you and Hermione and I came in a distant third,” she replied with a laugh.

“No, you didn’t. In your own way you’re every bit as smart as anyone I’ve ever met. Perhaps in a way that’s more important and it’s just one of the many reasons I consider myself the luckiest person in the world,” he said as he reached out and pulled her too him and they nestled against each other. With her head on his shoulder Ginny murmured in his ear,

“No luckier then any of us who have come to know you, my dear man. Certainly not any luckier then that young lady we left at Hogwarts this evening. Abigail was practically floating when I walked her back to her dorm room. How in the world did you find her that book on fixing muggle cars so quick?”

Harry smiled as he rested his cheek against the wealth of red hair that he so cherished.

“Well, when she spent all Saturday night talking to anyone who’d listen about Dad’s new Popular I knew she was hooked so I slipped away to a muggle book store that I had been in while I was researching ideas for the new arrangements for the Law Enforcement Section. I knew they were open on Sundays. They had all kinds of books on cars. She and Dad will have a great time working on that thing together this summer,” he said with a little chuckle.

As she lay there against him with her eyes closed, listening to his soft laugh Ginny marveled, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, at how easily he could act so quickly to make someone else so happy despite his own worries. She lifted her head up and used her hand to turn his to face her. Their lips met in a kiss that lasted well into the early morning.

By the middle of the week that followed the wonderful weekend when Abigail got to meet the extended Weasley family, and in no small way started her journey to become a member, Harry's frustrations were in no way lessened by what he was being told by his deputy and chief investigator. Both men were easily twice Harry's age but they had learned very early that he was not some figurehead not to be taken seriously. They knew his background and had seen him in action. They knew he bore scars, visible and invisible, as a result of encounters with some of the mightiest dark magic ever known, and he had won. So as he sat behind his desk in the smallish office, his brilliant green eyes boring into them from behind the round dark rimmed glasses, they felt considerable unease.

"So, we certainly have enough evidence to put every one of them into Azkaban for a pretty long time, but we can't seem to crack the code of silence. Not one of them will give a hint as to anything bigger or who was behind it all," Milligan said, his tone level but his discomfort evident in how he sat stiffly in the chair as opposed to his usual loose jointed manner. "I'm beginning to think there may not be anything there."

"Oh, no. It's there, I can feel it. Travers was part of the link. I could kick myself for not being more careful that day," Harry said irritably.

"I wouldn't recommend it, not with that leg of yours," Maxwell said straight faced.

Harry just snorted. He stared up at the ceiling and then looked back at the two older men.

"As much as I hate to say it, I may have to bring in some help that I wanted to avoid, but I'm not quite that desperate yet. Hopefully, Minister LeClerq has something to offer. When are his people due here?" Harry asked.

"This coming Monday," Maxwell repeated. "He must be really worried. His chief investigator and two others are coming."

“Ok. What’s happening with that portal? Did anyone remember to write down all those symbols, from both sides?” Harry asked.

“Yes, sir. They were recorded and a copy was sent by owl to Hogwarts on Monday. I understand that the spooks downstairs are pressuring the Director to get their hands on it but he’s convinced the Minister that it’s still ours. My guess is that the Minister puts a great store in anything you have to say,” Maxwell said with a small grin.

“Hmmm, I suspect that will start to change if we don’t start coming up with some answers. Alright, thank you gentlemen. I won’t make you endure my foul mood any more today,” Harry said.

“Yes, sir,” the two replied in unison and then left the office.

Harry returned to staring at the ceiling and he wasn’t sure how long he continued to do so. He was reluctant to bring Abigail into this. Not knowing the past history of the smugglers he feared what she might see and the impact it may have on her. She had been through some very difficult times and having seen how she reacted to the fears of being alone again it gave him pause. He was pulled out of himself when he heard a knock at his door.

“Come in,” he called out.

The door opened and Hermione stepped into his office. She smiled at him and gave him an appraising look.

“You have that look, Harry,” she said thoughtfully.

“What look?” he asked.

“The ‘something is going on and I better figure it out soon or I’m going to explode’ look,” she replied.

“I didn’t know I had one of those looks,” he said looking at her.

"Oh, yes you do. I've seen it more than a few times. Fortunately you usually figure it out before the exploding part," she said with a smile as she sat down across from him.

"The smugglers?"

"Yeah, how did you know?" he asked.

"So far it seems to be the only thing you've got going on that isn't going so well. The reorganization, the French, the wedding, Abigail, they all seem to be working out so I figured it was the only thing left."

Harry laughed about and said,

"Yeah, you're right. I seem to be surrounded by brilliantly perceptive women and lucky that I am. I was just sitting here thinking that Abigail could probably be of help but I just don't want to subject her to what she might see. I don't think it would be fair to her."

"I can understand that, Harry. She could probably be of immense help yet at what cost? A real dilemma. I wish I had an answer for you, Harry, I really do."

"I know, Hermione. So, what was it you came to see me about? Or has my foul mood spread through the building and you came to cheer me up?" he said.

"Well, I hope you are cheered by what I have to tell you. The Centaurs have requested another meeting, Harry. They have some questions to ask to help their deliberations. They asked if we could come up on Saturday. Apparently the stars seem to suggest it would be a good day to talk," she said and shrugged.

"Hmm, that's odd. I had a talk with Firenze not too long ago and he suggested that the stars weren't that specific about things. But if they think it's a good day to talk, I can manage it. Ginny has a match so that'll work. You want to meet here and then go?"

"That would be terrific, Harry. Say at nine o'clock?"

"In the lobby at nine. Wait, I have a better idea. Come to the Black house at eight. Kreacher would love to see you again and we'll talk over breakfast how will handle things."

"Ok, Harry," she said as she stood up. "And thank you, Harry, if I haven't already said it. I know how much of this rests on your standing with the other races."

He gave her one of his half smiles but he suppressed the usual shrug. Ginny and Fleur must have been having an effect after all.

And so it was that after an excellent breakfast on a warm and sunny Saturday morning, Harry and Hermione stepped onto the shielded porch of the Black house and with a final nod Disapparated to the spot in Hogsmeade near the memorial park. Harry looked over and promised himself he would visit after his time with the Centaurs had concluded. He and Hermione walked up to the gates of Hogwarts and saw the students starting to make their way down to Hogsmeade as Quidditch was done for the year and some pressure from preparing for exams needed to be released. It should be a profitable day for Weasleys Wizard Wheezes Harry thought. They made their way to Hagrid's hut and found their huge friend waiting for them, the nearly full grown Norbie frisking nearby. Harry noticed that while looking unchanged in most ways since they first met on his eleventh birthday there was a sprinkling of gray in his hair and beard.

"Harry, Hermione, wunnaful ta see yas. The Centaurs will meet us in the same clearing although ya do seem ta be moving better, Harry," Hagrid said with a smile.

"Not too bad, Hagrid. I tend to still carry this thing," he said waving the cane, "but it's mostly in case I get tired or have to climb a lot of stairs."

"In that case let's be goin'. Come along, Norbie," Hagrid said as he began heading for the path into the Forbidden Forest.

Norbie took point, bounding down the trail and then back again, snapping at the flying insects he stirred up. In less then ten minutes they entered the clearing where they had met Bane and Ronan the

first time. As they entered from one side, Bane and Ronan entered from the other and proceeded to meet them in the center. Other Centaurs stood at the edge of the clearing but made no move to come closer.

“Harry Potter, Serpent Slayer, and friend Hermione. Welcome back to the forest,” Bane said then turned and swept his arm to indicate the other Centaurs. “Others wished to be present to confirm those things we related after your first visit.”

Harry bowed to Bane and Ronan and then looking to the others at the opposite edge bowed again.

“Thank you for this welcome. We are honored by your request and continued interest in this discussion. My dear friend Hermione tells me that you have questions for us. We will be pleased to answer them as best we can. If there are answers we cannot provide here today, we will pursue them and provide the answers as quickly as can be,” Harry said.

Harry was keeping his attention on Ronan and Bane as courtesy required but Hermione was watching the other Centaurs and could see their expressions and how they would lean to whisper to one another. Then the questions came. While no one had thought to gainsay the Serpent Slayer, there were those who had wondered why the change in heart at the Ministry. They wished more details behind the question Hermione had asked of them at that first meeting. Harry deferred to Hermione and listened as she laid out in detail how the new leadership felt and how Hermione, beginning with her awakened sensibilities regarding the house elves had come to see how the whole of human relations with the other magical races was skewed and needed to be changed.

Harry took this time to observe how the Centaurs were reacting. He noticed some frowns which he took for concentration more than consternation as well as a number of nods or whispered asides. His observations were brought to an abrupt halt when a scream seared across his mind and a bright light flashed across his vision. It was Abigail and she was screaming for help. As the bright light faded he could ‘see’ her apparently being dragged down a side street by at

least two men, a hand clamped over her mouth. He knew exactly where she was and he tried to Disapparate but couldn't due to the protections placed on the school and grounds.

Those that were looking at him saw him go rigid for a moment, his eyes going wide and his face white. At the moment that he tried to Disapparate Bane looked at him.

"Serpent Slayer, you are distressed, what is amiss?" the Centaur said.

Brought back to himself he practically shouted,

"Abigail is in trouble, at Hogsmeade, a kidnapping. I have to save her," he said and then turned and began to run back down the path, oblivious to the shouting behind him.

Before he went a dozen paces his leg began to shoot sharp pains in all directions. Before he had gone another dozen the sound of galloping hooves registered and before he could react a strong hand gripped the back of his robes and he was swept up and over to come to rest astride the strong back of a Centaur for the second time in his life. Unbeknownst to the other Centaurs, Firenze had made his way near to the edge of the clearing off to the side of the others and when Harry had turned to run he bolted from cover and was down the trail behind Harry before anyone could react.

Harry held on as best he could as his friend and one time savior raced at full speed out of the forest and across the grounds of the school for the gate. His speed was only slightly less than what Buckbeak would have made in full flight and in only a few minutes Harry was outside the gate. Without thinking he disappeared off the Centaur's back and reappeared in the middle of the side street down which he could see two taller figures struggling to get a third, much smaller figure away. It looked like they were getting ready to pick her up when Harry took his already drawn wand and aimed it at the one trying to grab Abigail's flailing feet.

"STOP!" he bellowed at the two.

The one at her feet let go of the one ankle that he had managed to secure and went for his wand. Harry shouted,

“Expelliarmus.”

Even from a block away the impact was enough to send the wand flying and the man crashing with a glancing blow into the building behind and to the side of him to land in a heap on the pavement. Abigail continued to struggle in the grip of the second fellow who was now staring wide eyed at Harry as he strode down the street. The would-be kidnapper almost appeared mesmerized but soon snapped out of his daze because at that moment the would-be kidnappee, now having her feet under her grabbed the hand over her mouth and was able to get it away just enough so that she could bite down on it with all she had. The man let out a shout and pulled his now bleeding hand away which allowed Abigail enough freedom of movement to twist about and with all the strength she could muster, drive her tiny but determined fist directly into the groin of her assailant. The man let out another bellow of pain, released his grip on Abigail altogether and folded up to land on the pavement on his shoulders and knees. Not finished Abigail took a step back and landed a well placed kick into the man’s crotch from behind that changed the pained bass groans into tenor cries of agony.

Harry was less than a dozen paces away as Abigail looked up, a smile of triumph on her face that drained away to be replaced by wide eyed shock as she saw Harry’s face. She took several stumbling steps backwards as Harry bore down on the man laying on his side in the fetal position. He reached down and grabbed a handful of grubby collar and yanked up so that the man was facing him. Even through the slitted eyes, nearly blinded by pain and tears, what he was seeing registered and the fog of pain that enveloped his brain was burned away by abject terror. He stared back at Harry, who said in a voice that was as quiet as it was frightening,

“Who are you? Who ordered this?” Harry ground out. “Start talking or so help me, I’ll light this thing and push it through one ear and out the other,” he finished as he spelled the tip of his wand with ‘Lumos’ and a wand never burned brighter or hotter.

He scowled at the quivering man in his hand who was at once trying to pull away from the wand and shake his head at the same time. Harry said a little louder this time,

“Talk, damn you. You think what that child did to you hurts, perhaps you’d like to feel some real pain, you bastard,” he said as he let go of the man’s collar, dropping him back onto the pavement and standing up straight.

He pointed his wand down at the fellow and the sound of Hermione shouting at him from the top of the street didn’t even register. As he began to say, “Cruc...” he was brought up short by a voice that never failed to get his attention.

“No, Harry, don’t you dare,” Ginny said firmly. “That’s not what you’re about.”

Harry turned to face Ginny, his wand still pointed down at the kidnapper, barely registering the sight of the redhead standing beside Abigail, one arm protectively around the slight girl’s shoulder, the other reaching towards him. She got a look at Harry and it frightened her but she had always been the one who could deal with him no matter what. She could see the whites of those beautiful green eyes blaze with red as his rage consumed him. He looked back down at the target of that rage, his wand quivering as was his entire body, his entire being.

“No, Harry. Back away. Let the others deal with these two. Abigail is safe and that’s all that matters right now. The rest can wait until later. Step back and come to me,” she said, her voice not betraying the fear that gripped her soul.

He looked at her again, seemingly recognizing her for the first time. The red faded from his eyes and he blinked, the wand falling from his hand to clatter onto the pavement. He was suddenly aware that there were others watching him as well. He recognized that there were a number of red heads behind and off to the side of Ginny. Some of the other Weasleys had arrived. Hermione was standing a ways up the street, her wand out and ready, her eyes wide. Behind her was Hagrid and a number of students. He looked back at Ginny and his

shoulders slumped. He turned to walk to her but he sagged as his outraged knee sent bolts of pain up his thigh. Both Ginny and Abigail hurried forward to hold him up. Regardless of the pain he knelt down in front of Abigail and no words were exchanged, there was no need. He pulled her to him and held her tight as Ginny rested a hand on each of them.

After a few moments someone coughed uncomfortably from behind him. Harry turned his head and found two Aurors and four Patroller trainees standing behind him. The older of the Aurors looked meaningfully at the figure still curled up on the pavement.

“Shall we take these in hand for you, sir?” she asked.

Harry nodded and said quietly,

“I suggest you take them up to Madame Pomfrey if she’s agreeable. Neither one is in particularly good shape.”

“Harry,” Abigail whispered close to his ear. “Should I ‘look’ at them first?”

“No, little one. I don’t think I want you to do that. Who knows what they’ve done in the past. I don’t want you exposed to that just yet.”

“But, sir. After what they’ve done, I don’t care what I see. I want you to be able to stop all this,” she said, a hint of steel behind the airy words.

“I know you’re angry about what they did and tried to do to you, Abigail. But now is not the time for that sort of thing,” he replied looking at those big dark eyes.

“I didn’t mean about me, sir. I’m so angry about what they almost made you do. And they actually made me afraid of you, just for a bit, and I won’t ever forgive them for that. Please, sir. Let me.”

She looked so determined Harry couldn’t refuse her. He looked up at Ginny who just nodded, her lips drawn tight. Then he looked at Abigail and said,

“Ok, you win, but first you have to do something for me.”

“Anything, sir.”

“Help me up,” he said quietly. “The knee refuses to cooperate.”

Abigail’s eyes flew wider for an instant and a giggle tried to push past her clamped lips. Both she and Ginny took an arm and helped him stand up, Ginny taking his arm and wrapping it around her shoulder. Abigail stepped over to where the man was laying still curled up in a ball of pain and fear. She looked down at his face and her eyes lost their focus. Harry saw her fist ball up again and then she began to speak softly.

“His name is Stefan Rostov. He’s a cousin or something of that man who worked in the potions shop. They wanted to trade me for him and the others. They know you and I are close but not why. He came to England about a month after you arrested all those smugglers and has been trying to come up with a way to free them. This was the third weekend they were up here. That other one is a friend and they both are part of the smuggling plan but they worked back in their home country. I don’t think they know too much about the bigger plan, but there is something going on.”

When she finished her eyes focused again and she swayed a little but Harry pulled her close and helped support her. He looked at the Auror trainer and said,

“Ok, they’re yours. Once they are ready, take them in and turn them over to Milligan. Tell him I’ll send a message along with what you just heard,” he said then his gaze swept the other five of his subordinates. “Understand what you just saw and heard is confidential. It’s worth your jobs if I find out you’ve talked about it. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” they all chorused.

They then moved in, one team to a man and bound them and began to move them up to the school and to Madame Pomfrey. Now that the crisis had passed Harry was able to take stock of what was going on

around him. Hermione and Hagrid had moved closer from their end and the Weasleys who had arrived came from the other. He saw Bill, Charlie and Ron. He cocked his head at Ron with a questioning glance.

"Off duty today, Harry, no dereliction here," Ron said with a bit of a smile.

Harry nodded and then looked up the street and Hagrid caught his eye.

"Alright there, Harry?"

"Not sure, Hagrid. I think I undid a lot of my physical therapy running like that. And I left my cane back in the clearing," he said as he shifted to ease the weight on his tortured leg.

"No worries, Harry," Hagrid said and then raised his fingers to his lips and whistled.

It was answered by a muffled bark and after a moment or two, the big brindled Mastiff yearling shouldered through the crowd with Harry's cane in his mouth. Harry gave a tired half smile as Hagrid retrieved the cane and gave Norbie a treat from his pocket. He took out a square of rough cloth and wiped a fair portion of dog drool from the twisted wood and carried it over to where Harry stood.

"Thanks, Hagrid, and to Norbie."

"Well after what ya blurted out and then takin' off like that, I just hoisted Hermione up and followed after. The other Centaurs came ta the edge of the forest but wouldn't go no further," Hagrid replied.

"I hope this hasn't made a mess of things with them," Harry said.

"I don't think so, Harry. That bunch has a lot o' respect for ya, and this was about family and they take that sorta thing very seriously."

“Well, let’s get back there and see if we can salvage something,” he said then looked at Ginny. “Aren’t you supposed to have a match today?”

“Yes, in about two hours. But I can at least get you to the gate. Come on,” she said.

Harry looked back over his shoulder and the Weasley brothers.

“Thanks for being here. Is there any chance you could come to the Black house tomorrow? I’d like to find out how you knew to get here. I’ll even feed you lunch,” he said with a small smile.

“Sure thing, Harry, we’ll be there,” Bill answered for all of them.

All in all it was a long walk back to the clearing in the woods. Ginny reluctantly left him at the gates to the school. She promised she’d see him later after the match was done. By unspoken agreement Abigail remained with Harry and Hermione. Hagrid escorted them back to the clearing. Oddly enough, Norbie walked along besides Abigail without any of his usual antics. When they returned Bane and Ronan were still in the clearing, but the group around the far edge had grown considerably.

“Serpent Slayer, all is well with you?” Ronan rumbled.

“For the moment, Ronan, thank you for asking,” Harry replied softly, clearly drained by recent events. “Two men tried to abduct Abigail here, but she called to me and I was in time. She even managed to lay one of them out quite nicely.”

When Harry saw the quizzical look on Ronan’s face he proceeded to tell them how Abigail subdued her assailant. Ronan and Bane both nodded and then Bane stepped forward to stand before her, looking down from his imposing height.

“This is the gifted one?” he asked.

"Yes, she is, and pardon my poor manners. This is Miss Abigail Westwood of Ravenclaw house. Abigail, this is Bane and that is Ronan. Two individuals I am honored to call friends."

Abigail had to bend backwards a bit to maintain eye contact at this close range but she did so and managed a bit of a curtsy as she said,

"I'm very pleased to meet you both, sirs," she said.

"A voice like a breeze hides the heart of a warrior. We welcome you to the forest, young one."

Bane came around to stand closer to Harry.

"In your absence we discussed your answers to our questions and we agreed that in due course we will present a proposal to friend Hermione Granger to be taken to your Ministry. We will let Hagrid know when we are ready," Bane finished and began to turn away.

Ronan took a step forward and looked closely at Harry as he leaned on his cane, Hermione holding his other arm.

"Have a care, Serpent Slayer. Your peril was great this day, perhaps more than you realize. You are poised on a path to greatness but such paths are often the most dangerous to travel," he said then turned and moved off to join the others of his herd who had already begun to fade into the woods.

"Well, that was a bit ominous," Hermione said quietly.

"Yeah, but I think I know what he was talking about. I pretty much lost control there. Who knows what that could have started? I think I need to get to the hospital wing to check on our two friends and see if Madame Pomfrey has some ice for this knee."

"I'll walk you up there, Harry," Hermione said.

"Me, too," piped Abigail.

Harry just nodded as he walked slowly behind Hagrid with Hermione propping him up on one side, the cane holding him up on the other. Abigail walked just behind with Norbie close by her side. Harry noticed what was going on and he said,

“Hagrid, what’s with Norbie? He’s usually chasing bugs and running ahead.”

“Dunno exactly, Harry. Critters be awful perceptive sometimes. Maybe he feels young Abigail needs lookin' after,” Hagrid replied over his shoulder.

Abigail looked at the big Mastiff and reached over to rub the huge blocky head just behind his ears.

“Thank you, Norbie,” she said and let her hand rest on his neck as they continued to walk out of the Forbidden Forest.

It took some time but Harry finally arrived at the hospital wing and knocked on the door. He could hear footsteps approaching and the door swung open to reveal Madame Pomfrey.

“Harry. I wondered if I’d see you today. Are you here to see them?” she asked with a definite and unpleasant emphasis on the last word.

“Yes, Madame Pomfrey. But I’m also here to see if you have any ice I can put on this knee. I managed to aggravate it pretty badly this morning.”

“Oh, dear. You wait right there,” she said and bustled off to return a moment later with the wheel chair. “Sit yourself down.”

“Uh, I don’t think I’m that bad off, Madame Pomfrey,” Harry said.

“Young fellow, the moment you walked through that door back there you came under my care and my direction. So with all due deference to your being Chief of Aurors you will sit down in this chair,” she said firmly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry replied, his face flushed.

So he sat down and was wheeled into the ward where he saw two beds occupied with the attempted kidnappers. Arranged around the bed were a group of senior students and the older of the two Aurors who were on duty that day in Hogsmeade. As Harry was wheeled over she took a couple of steps to meet him.

"Sir," was all she said.

"How are things going with our prisoners, um, Stanton, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, that's right," she replied. "The one you took down still hasn't regained consciousness yet. Madame Pomfrey said he took a nasty knock on the head and it may be a while. The other one had to be sedated. He was in a lot of pain but he was also nearly incoherent from fear. Kept mumbling something about demons. You really scared the hell out of him, sir," she said.

Harry looked over at the two men and then back at the witch in front of him. He recognized her from the meeting at his house. She was the one who suggested no one begrudged him his recovery time after the battle with the mutated dragon. He just nodded and said,

"Well it seems our Miss Westwood here is something of a street fighter. I don't know where she learned it but she knew where he was most vulnerable. As for the other, I didn't exactly cover myself with glory with that loss of restraint," he said shaking his head.

"I doubt anyone of us would have acted any differently under the circumstances, sir. You're just capable of doing a lot more damage," she said with a half smile.

Harry just nodded a bit and then looked up at the students.

"What's with them?"

"Ravenclaw six and seventh years. Seems they took offense at these two trying to make off with one of their own. They sort of formed up on us as we brought these two up. I figured they could help watch

them while the rest of ours went back to work in Hogsmeade,” Stanton replied.

Harry looked up at them and said,

“Thank you, I appreciate your help. You’re all a credit to your house.”

There were a number of ‘thank you, sir’ and ‘yes, sir’ and each stood just a tad taller and straighter. While the conversation was going on Madame Pomfrey came back with what looked like the heat bag but a different color.

“Here you go, Harry. This is similar to the heat bag but in reverse. The cooling affect is gentler then just slapping on a bag of ice.”

She elevated his leg using the adjustable foot rest and then placed the bag on his ravaged knee. It was slightly cool to the touch at first but then it gradually became colder but not uncomfortably so. Harry leaned back in the chair.

“That does feel better. Thanks again, as usual, Madame Pomfrey.”

“You’re welcome, as usual, Harry. Just let that stay there for a while,” she said and then she went to check on the two detainees.

Abigail had moved up to Harry’s side and asked,

“Are you feeling any better, sir?”

“A little bit, Abigail. I’m sure it will feel a lot better in a while. How are you feeling? This has been a pretty tough morning for you,” he asked in return.

“I’m starting to feel a little tired right now. I think I could use a nap.”

Harry looked up at Hermione and asked,

“Could you see that Abigail gets back to her room okay? I’d feel better if she wasn’t alone.”

"Of course, Harry. Then I'd like to get back to the office and write all this up. Will you be okay here by yourself?" she asked.

"Of course, I'm not really by myself as it is and Ginny will be back later," he replied with a smile.

"Excuse me, sir," one of the students interjected. "If you can spare me here I'll go back with Abigail as well. We'll keep an eye on her for you," the young witch said.

"I would appreciate that very much, thank you."

Abigail came over and gave Harry a hug which he returned and then she left with Hermione and the Ravenclaw witch. Then he looked back at Stanton.

"Keep an eye on these two and when Madame Pomfrey gives the word take them in."

"Yes, sir."

Harry then looked over at Madame Pomfrey and asked,

"Would it be ok if I went outside to that balcony? It's a really nice day out and I could use the quiet."

"Of course, Harry. We'll go now," the healer replied and proceeded to wheel Harry out through the double doors to what was more a patio than a balcony. It was rather roomy and was catching plenty of afternoon sun.

"You just stay here, Harry, and try to relax. If anyone comes looking for you I'll send them out if it's important or chase them off if it's not."

"Thanks."

Harry leaned his head back against the chair back and closed his eyes. He tried to think of nothing because he felt anything else that came to mind would be far too troublesome to let himself relax. He tried to use his visualization skills and after a couple of tries was able

to cleanse his mind of everything but the sounds of the breeze and the few birds that could be heard at this height. He wasn't sure if he had actually fallen asleep but he had been able to slip into a fairly restful state for a while until he heard the door swing open and some light footfalls. A hand came to rest on his arm.

"arry?"

He turned and looked up to see Fleur standing next to his chair, looking down at him.

"Hello, Fleur. Thanks for coming," Harry said with a small smile.

"You are welcome, 'arry. I would 'ave been 'ere sooner, but Bill eensisted I calm down first," she said with a bit of an embarrassed grin.

"You got excited? No, not you. You're always so calm and level headed," he replied straight faced.

Fleur laughed and knelt down next to the chair.

"You are such a bad boy, 'arry. I stopped to see Abigail but they said she was fast asleep. 'ow ees she?"

"She was tired but calm when she left here. She seemed more angry then anything. It's funny how the women in my life seem to have such bad tempers," he said with a grin. "I must bring it out in them. Anyway, I think it helped that she did such a good job of handling herself during the whole thing. She was able to stay calm enough to reach out to me and then when the opportunity presented itself she took matters into her own hands."

"ow so, 'arry. Bill did not know all the details."

Harry retold the story of how Abigail had dropped the one named Rostov. Fleur's eyes went wide as Harry told her how the tiny witch used very nonmagical methods to free herself. He mentioned what Bane had said about her as well.

“Eet ees strange, ‘arry. She seems so gentle, so frail.”

Harry just nodded and decided against mentioning what went on once he had Rostov in hand. He suggested that Fleur sit on one of the benches built out from the low wall and he wheeled over to sit by her.

“So all I really managed to do was aggravate the knee some more and we know how to deal with that,” he said as he tapped the cold bag. “Ginny will be along after her match and she’ll make sure I get home ok. But I do appreciate you coming out here to see me. I really don’t mind a little motherly concern now and again,” he said with a smile.

“I am glad to ‘ear you say that, ‘arry. You seem to need a great deal of looking after and we cannot leave it all to just one person,” she said with a laugh.

They sat and talked for a while about this and that when Fleur posed a question.

“‘arry, where are you and Geeny going to spend your ‘oneymoon?”

Harry blinked and said,

“Um, to be honest, Fleur, I don’t think we’ve even thought about it. I guess it is something important. I don’t think just hiding out at the Black house would go over too well. I know George and Angelina just went to Blackpool for the weekend but they both have businesses to run. Any suggestions?”

“Yes, I do. My aunt and uncle ‘ave a very nice ‘ouse not far from Beauxbaton. They do not use eet during the late summer. ‘alf of Europe seems to descend on the area and they go elsewhere but you and Geeny would find eet very cozy I theenk.”

“Wow, that would be wonderful Fleur. Maybe I could arrange a visit to the Academy while we are there. Ginny would love to see the palace and the gardens. She’s going to be here in a little while, unless the match runs long, and we can talk about it,” he said excitedly.

"The match didn't run long and I'm here so what are we talking about?" Ginny said from the doorway.

"Hey, come here and sit down, love. Fleur just exposed a flaw in our wedding plans, well post wedding plans and offered up a great solution. Go ahead and tell her, Fleur."

Fleur repeated her idea of the house on the French coast near Beauxbaton for their honeymoon hide-away and Ginny got very excited.

"Oh, Harry, that would be so great. Do you really think your aunt and uncle would let us use it?"

"Oui, Geeny. They are very nice people and they do adore me, after all," Fleur replied with a straight face and then started to laugh.

"Will the team allow you that much time off, Ginny? With all my mishaps you've spent a far amount of time away this past year," Harry said, concerned.

"I think so, Harry. They have a rather large soft spot when it comes to you, you know. And we picked up a new reserve chaser because they know I won't be back after my option is up and this will give her some playing time. Um, that reminds me Harry. I'd like to invite the team to the wedding, including Ms. Hapnafl. I think we'll have the room."

"Of course. Is that something Mum has worked on or do we need to do something about it? I'd imagine the invitations would have to go out pretty soon, wouldn't they? We have less than two months, right?"

"Mum has the list for the Weasley side worked out and I told her I'd ask you about the Harpies. I figured you'd want the DA and probably your Quidditch mates," she said.

"Our Quidditch mates, you mean, you had a fair amount of time on the team, right? I'd also like to include your family Fleur if they weren't already part of the Weasley list."

“Merci, ‘arry, I believe Muum put them down but eet ees sweet for you to theenk of them,” Fleur said with a smile.

“Oh, we should include Madame Maxime. I think that would be a good gesture between the schools. Hmmm, do you think if I invited Kingsley Shacklebolt and Abernathy Grimsson it would be too much like I was playing up to them?”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Harry. You’ve already proved yourself. I don’t think that would look bad at all. Let’s see, we have to remember the Hogwarts directors and faculty,” Ginny said and then looked at Harry with a serious expression. “What about the Dursleys?”

Harry let out a long breath and looked at Ginny.

“I can think of a thousand reasons not to and only one to do it but that one outweighs all the others.”

“Family, ‘arry?” Fleur asked.

“That’s right, Fleur. Whether I like it or not, and as bad as it might have been, they provided the sanctuary that kept me alive until I could get here to Hogwarts. If I think about it enough I guess they are the reason you two have so much work to do where I’m concerned. But that doesn’t really matter so yes, we’ll invite them. They probably won’t come but that’s beside the point.”

“Hang on, Harry. This is getting kind of a lot. Let me see if Madame Pomfrey has a piece of parchment,” Ginny said and she hurried back inside.

After Ginny had disappeared inside Fleur looked at Harry and noticed the care lines on his forehead and around his eyes. Not yet twenty one and already he was showing the signs of care and stress. Her eyes began to tear and she turned to look out over the low wall down at the green lawn and the lake. It took her just a moment to regain her composure and she was looking at the door when Ginny came back out with a small lap tray that had parchment, quill and ink. She sat next to Fleur on the bench and arranged everything on her lap.

“Madame Pomfrey says she uses these for students who are sick so they don’t fall behind in their work. Can you imagine, sick in bed and still having to do homework,” Ginny said with a mock shudder.

She proceeded to write down the list of individual names and groups that they had discussed. They pulled the DA list apart to separate those that would be included in the family list like Angelina, Hermione and Ron from the names of friends. Harry looked down at the ground for a moment and then looked up at Ginny and Fleur.

“I’ve had a thought but I’m not sure if I should mention it,” he said.

The two young women looked at Harry and saw the pained look on his face. Fleur was sitting closest to him and she took hold of his hand.

“What ees eet, mon frere?”

“Yes, Harry, out with it. You aren’t allowed to hold back anything from us, you know that,” Ginny said, her face a mask of sympathy.

“I think we should have places set aside for the family and friends who can’t be there with us. But I think that it might be kind of depressing. I don’t know how we should do that,” he said, his voice subdued.

Ginny set the lap tray aside and came to kneel at Harry’s side opposite Fleur. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him tightly for a moment and then let him go. She looked into those bright green eyes that were looking haunted at the moment.

“I think that would be a very touching thing to do, sweetheart. Let me talk to Mum about it. She could probably think of a way to do it that would keep everything in balance,” she said with a smile.

Fleur reached over and took Harry’s head into her hands and pulled him to her so she could kiss his cheek. She chose not to say anything. Harry took a deep breath and let it out.

“Ok, so can you think of anyone we might have missed? We have more than enough room,” he said.

“Let’s take the weekend to think about it and we’ll make it final by Monday, how does that sound?” Ginny offered.

“Sounds like a plan, love. Um, that reminds me, how are you coming with the whole bridal party thing? Have you figured out who they’re going to be?”

“Yup, I’ve asked Luna to be my maid of honor, and Fleur, Hermione, Angelina and one of my teammates, Eleanor MacManus to be the other attendants. How about you? I know you’ve got Ron as your best man, how about the rest?”

“Well, let’s see that leaves four, so I’ll make it a clean sweep and ask the rest of your brothers,” he said.

“What about Neville? He’s been your friend almost as long as Ron,” Ginny asked.

“Well, you have the four attendants. I can’t leave out one of your brothers. That could cause all kinds of issues. I know Percy and I had our differences but that’s ancient history now. So I’m kind of stuck unless you come up with one more.”

Ginny had taken her seat again and she chewed on the end of the quill as she thought. She looked over at Harry and then at Fleur and her eyes opened wider and a little grin shaped her lips.

“Fleur, I would imagine that your parents would accept the invitation, right?”

“Oui, Geeny. I ‘ave mentioned eet to Maman et Papa and they would be ‘appy to come. Gabi ees very excited about eet,” Fleur replied.

“How excited would Gabi be to be in the wedding, as the fifth attendant?” Ginny asked, her grin turning sly.

“Ginny? You’d ask Gabi to be in the wedding?” Harry asked, sounding very surprised.

“Why not? She’ll be there as a guest and it would really give her something to talk about at the first meeting of the Harry Potter Fan Club in September,” Ginny said.

“Oh, Geeny. Gabi weell faint dead away. Do you weesh to ask 'er or do you want me to talk to 'er?” Fleur said excitedly.

“Would you please, Fleur?” Ginny asked.

“Avec joie, gladly,” Fleur replied.

“Wow,” Harry said.

“Wow, what, sweetheart?” Ginny asked.

“I was just visualizing your bridal party. That’s going to be one stunning line up. I’ll be able to wear any old thing because no one is going to pay me any attention,” he said with a smile.

“Oh no you don’t, my dear. You will be dressed to perfection because I won’t be looking at anyone or anything but you.”

Harry stood on platform nine and three quarters at King’s Cross Station awaiting the arrival of the Hogwarts Express. He had not thought he would be doing this until sometime well into the future, probably another dozen years or so at least, when he and Ginny’s first child was old enough to attend Hogwarts. Now he was awaiting the arrival of Abigail, his fourteen year old legal ward. It seemed to Harry that he had moved into the adult world a lot faster then was really fair. He didn’t have much of a chance to dwell on this seeming injustice as he heard the chuffing of the steam locomotive as it rolled into the station. He watched expectantly as students began to pour off the train, some into the arms of waiting family, others who were most likely muggle born, heading straight for the wall that led to the outside world after they secured their luggage.

Harry finally saw Abigail exit a carriage apparently bracketed by two significantly larger students. She looked around and finally caught sight of Harry and broke into a huge smile and waved. She walked slightly ahead of the two young wizards that followed behind. Fortunately Harry's knee had improved significantly in the days that followed the attempted kidnapping so he was able to absorb the impact of Abigail rushing at him and flinging her arms around him.

"Hello, sir, I mean, Harry. It's so good to see you again," she said airily.

"I'm happy to see you too, little one," he said happily and then looked up at her two companions with a questioning glance.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. The Ravenclaws decided we'd keep an eye on her until she was with you. She's something of a house favorite these days," one of the young men said.

"Thank you, guys. I really appreciate your concern," he said and recognizing them as seventh years he added, "and congratulations on graduating. What plans do you have?"

The larger of the two replied,

"I'm coming to work for you, sir. I qualified at the tryouts but like you told us, I finished school. I report in two weeks. Whipple's the name, sir."

"Oh, yes, I recognized you from my lectures. Glad to have you with us. And you?" Harry asked of the other student.

"Summer off, sir and then I start Healer training in September."

Harry nodded then laughed as he said,

"I wish you the best of luck and hope I don't have need of your services anytime soon."

"Yes, sir," the young wizard replied with a smile. "It was good seeing you again, sir," he said then looked down at Abigail. "Have a good summer, Abigail. Take care of Ravenclaw for us."

"So long and thanks," she said as the two smiled at her and then walked off to find their families.

Harry helped Abigail recover her trunk which the porter placed on a cart for them. Next came a caged owl that was still on loan from the school. When all was satisfactory Harry pushed the cart with Abigail walking along beside, her hand resting on top of one of his.

"Where are we going, sir?" she asked, raising her usual whispered voice above the crowd.

"We'll start at the Black house and get you set up in your room and then we've been invited to dinner at the Burrow.

"Oh, good. I can't wait to see what Mr. Weasley has been doing with the Popular. I've read the book you gave me and want to try a couple of things."

"You know, Abigail. If you were a muggle you'd probably wind up as an auto mechanic. Maybe you can be a broom technician for the Nimbus company," Harry said with a laugh.

"Well, I don't know. The Ministry has cars that they use and there's the Knight bus so I'm sure there are magical mechanics somewhere but that's not what I'm going to do. I want to come work for you," she said, looking up at him with big dark serious eyes.

Any further discussion was interrupted by their passage through the barrier wall and then the need to be discrete among the muggles. They rolled the cart out onto the pavement and saw one of the aforementioned Ministry cars waiting for them. The driver got out and opened the boot and helped Harry put the trunk in. The owl was carried into the back seat by Abigail and Harry climbed in next to her. As the car pulled away and insinuated itself into the traffic Harry looked over at Abigail and said,

“Are you really sure about that, Abigail?”

“Yes, sir. I thought I was sure for a while now but I was positive after what happened in Hogsmeade. There are some pretty nasty people out there and even if they aren’t on the same level as Voldemort they could still cause so much trouble for our world. I’ve been able to help you with my abilities without even trying very hard. I’m sure I could be a lot more help if I was doing it full time,” she said looking at him.

Harry took a deep breath. The small size and wispy voice could be very misleading. Abigail was growing up and her view of the world and her place in it was gaining clarity.

“I understand how you feel and I appreciate it but you still have four years of school to go and you might change your mind,” he said.

“Only two, Harry. I don’t intend to go past my OWLs. My talent doesn’t have much to do with going to NEWT levels and this way I can start sooner if it’s okay with you,” she said a bit tentatively but her eyes were still serious.

“You’ll have to give me time to think about it, little one. We’ll talk about it some more over the summer. But most importantly I want you to have fun this summer, ok? That’s what summers are for,” he said with a smile.

“I can’t wait to get started,” she said with a grin.

Harry's Future, Part 17

Harry looked around the small waiting room at the sterile looking green walls. He thought Abigail could work wonders in here. He looked down at the subject of those musings and smiled. They were waiting for their appointment with Dr. Medford to see if the specialist that had proven so helpful to Harry in the past could offer any insight into his connection with Abigail. He looked past Abigail to see Fleur sitting on the diminutive witch's other side, their heads bent towards each other in whispered conversation. The silver haired beauty had insisted on accompanying the two for 'moral support' as she put it. Harry was convinced it was just an excuse to be able to spend more time with Abigail. He smiled a bit and shook his head.

A few moments later a witch dressed in a nurse's uniform appeared and said,

"Mr. Potter, Ms. Westwood, would you please come with me. Dr. Medford is ready for you now."

Harry stood and looked at Fleur.

"You'll be ok out here by yourself?"

"Of course, 'arry. I knew I would be waiting for you so I brought some theengs to keep me bzy," she said looking up at him.

Fleur gave Abigail's hand a squeeze and then waved them both off to follow the nurse. They walked down a narrow corridor that ended at a door which opened into a moderate sized room that contained two small hospital style beds and a stool. Dr. Medford stood between the beds and smiled as Harry and Abigail entered.

"Harry, it's good to see you again. And this must be Miss Abigail Westwood. My name is Dr. Medford and I'm very pleased to meet you, young lady," he said with gentle smile.

"Hello, sir," Abigail said timidly.

“Miss Westwood, I understand that you may be a bit nervous about this. But I assure you that there should be no discomfort. No poking or prodding. Harry can tell you that I have managed to work with him on several occasions and haven’t done him any harm.”

“He’s right, Abigail. And I’ll be right here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ok,” the doctor began, “first I’d like you to each to sit on a bed and I’ll start the preliminary exam.”

Harry helped Abigail up onto the one bed and then he gingerly maneuvered himself onto the other. That sat facing each other and Harry gave Abigail a wink and raised eyebrow. She smiled back and stifled a giggle.

“I’ll start with Harry since he knows what to expect and you’ll be able to see how he reacts,” Dr. Medford said and then held up his hand in the way Harry had come to recognize as his way of asking permission to begin.

After Harry nodded the healerr placed his hand on Harry’s head and began the mumbled incantations that were part of the exam. Harry felt the familiar series of tingles and pulses. He was in clear view of the young witch opposite him and he looked at her with an expression that implied ‘see, nothing to it’. Abigail watched wide eyed but smiled back a bit. Then the healer removed his hand.

“Well, Harry, all seems in order. All the patterns seem nice and stable,” he said and then he turned to Abigail. “If I may, young lady?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, shifting a bit and then sitting up straighter.

“If you would, please, can you shift your hair back away from the left side of your head?”

“Like this, sir?” she asked as she pulled her long dark hair and let it all fall over her right shoulder.

“Perfect, thank you,” the healer replied as he held his hand up and Abigail nodded consent.

In the same manner that he had examined Harry, Dr. Medford placed his hand on her head with the thumb at her temple and the fingertips along the back of the skull. He began his incantations and Harry could see Abigail’s lips form an ‘o’ and her eyes widen a bit. Then she silently mouthed at Harry ‘it tickles’. Harry smiled back at her. The examination went on for some time. Then the healer took his hand off her head and sat down on the stool.

“Well, that was certainly interesting. I can honestly say in my forty plus years as a Healer those were the most unique patterns of thought and brain function that I’ve ever come across. I don’t say that to alarm either of you, just to point out that I have no frame of reference to draw from,” Dr. Medford said as he took a deep breath. “Let me see if I can explain it. Any pattern that I’ve examined always has a, well, a closed aspect to it. The thoughts that occur in here,” he tapped his head, “stay in here. We take things in with our eyes and ears and touch certainly but the thoughts stay inside. If we choose to share them we need to channel them out through speech or gestures or writing. Young Miss Westwood here has patterns that are exceedingly open. It may be that that is what allows her to take in what is going on around her and follow backwards as you’ve described,” he said and then looked at Harry closely as he continued.

“Some of the patterns do closely resemble some of yours, Harry. It may be that is how you two are able to link as you do. Which one of you is the first to speak when you’ve connected?” he asked.

“I do, sir,” Abigail said, barely above a whisper.

“Yes, I would have thought so,” Dr. Medford said thoughtfully. “Harry, you’ve established that there is a family relationship between the two of you?”

“Yes, sir. It goes back a long way but we are descended from the Peverells.”

The healer let out a low whistle.

"That's quite a powerful pedigree to say the least. Did you discover anything else?"

"Yes, sir," Harry continued, "Abigail is a fifth generation descendent of Cassandra Trelawney and there are several other witches and wizards in her line that were known for their mental abilities."

"The pieces began to fit then," Dr. Medford began. "I can't imagine what the finished puzzle would look like but at least it gives us some clues as to what we can expect. Now if you would both indulge me, I'd like to see if we can investigate the connection that occurs between you two. I can help you slip into that near sleep doze that you described Harry and if things work right I may be able to observe something of what transpires."

"I'm game," Harry said, "how about you, little one?"

"Yes, sir, this hasn't been so bad," she replied.

"Excellent. If you two would just lie back on the beds and prop yourselves up against the pillows I'll get in position between you here on the stool. That's right. Now let us proceed."

Dr. Medford sat on the raised stool so he could reach across each of his patients and place his hands on their heads as before. He began to mumble a different incantation this time, one that soothed and relaxed and Harry and Abigail felt themselves slip into that gray space that had become so familiar to them.

"Hello, sir," Abigail whispered.

"Hello, little one," Harry said as he thought a smile. "You know it occurs to me that I'll have to stop calling you that."

"Why, sir, I like it when you call me that."

"Well, Abigail you're fourteen years old now. A young lady. It's not really fitting, is it?" Harry replied.

"I doubt that I'm likely to grow much bigger, Harry. So it is accurate and besides, you're the only one that calls me that so it's special. It makes me feel special."

"You certainly are special, so if you don't mind then I won't stop," Harry said.

"Thank you, Harry," Abigail said then stopped. "Shhhh, sir. Don't say anything."

Harry was about to say, 'why not' but thought that would have been pretty pointless so he 'listened' in silence and tried to pick up whatever Abigail was focused on.

"Oh, dear," she said. "They're watching us, Harry."

"Who's watching, Abigail?" Harry said, concerned.

"Your mum and dad," Abigail said "and I think Sirius is, too."

"Can..can I talk to them," Harry choked out.

"I'm sorry but I don't think so. I tried but they don't answer. I think they are just watching to see how you are doing, sir. They still worry about you, you know."

Harry couldn't bring himself to answer and he began to struggle against the gray. He didn't want to stay anymore. Very quickly he woke up and sat upright on the bed and looked around. He could feel the tears running down his cheeks. He swung his legs off the bed and began heading for the door.

"Harry, what it is, what happened?" Dr. Medford asked but Harry was already through the door so he looked to Abigail. "What happened, Miss Westwood, can you tell me?"

Abigail took a deep breath and sighed,

“He found out that his family, his real family, was there watching us and he couldn’t talk to them or see them. He couldn’t bear to stay.”

Dr. Medford stood up and he gestured to the nurse who had been standing nearby throughout the examination to help Abigail down and then follow. He then went through the door and down the corridor. He stopped at the entrance to the waiting room when he saw that Harry was standing by the window that looked out over a London street. At his side was Fleur, one arm around his shoulders, her head close to his as she spoke quietly into his ear. Abigail walked past him and came up to Harry on his other side and took hold of his hand in both of hers. Harry pulled his hand free and put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her in close. Dr. Medford whispered to the nurse who nodded and then hurried away.

In a matter of moments Dr. Medford was joined by another healer, a witch of advanced middle age, her hair heavily streaked with gray. She was of medium height and slender build. She neither spoke nor gestured. She simply stood and observed what passed between the three at the window. After another ten minutes had elapsed Harry seemed to stand straighter and with a last whispered comment and kiss on the cheek from Fleur he turned around to face the two healers.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Medford. It seems I can face down evil dark wizards and oversized dragons but some things I have trouble handling,” he said with a tap to his forehead.

“My apologies, Harry. I had no idea things would turn out that way. Please, may we all sit down? I don’t expect anyone else up here for a long while. May I introduce my colleague, Dr. Parsons? She works in my department. I thought she might be able to help fit of a few more of the puzzle pieces together. Dr. Parsons, this is Harry Potter, Abigail Westwood and ...” he tailed off.

“This is Fleur Delacour Weasley. She’s my soon to be brother-in-laws wife, but very much my big sister,” Harry said with a smile.

“I’m very pleased to meet all of you. I’m very familiar with Mr. Potter of course. Dr. Medford has also consulted with me somewhat on Miss Westwood. I’m given to understand there was a bit of a problem

during the examination. May we discuss it?" she asked, her face at once very professional but something was there that seemed very gentle and sympathetic.

Harry took a deep breathe and said,

"Well, I guess I'll start," and he began to discuss what had occurred.

Dr. Parsons would nod, ask a question here or there and soon Harry was delving into the previous sessions where he and Abigail had connected, giving details about his brief meeting with his mother's image, even the series of dreams during his coma. Fleur and Abigail sat silently as did Dr. Medford. It wasn't long before Harry and Dr. Parsons were deep in conversation, more like an interview where she questioned and he answered. Dr. Medford caught Fleur's eye and with facial expression and gesture suggested they leave the two alone for a while. As unobtrusively as they could, the two young women and the elderly doctor got up and left the room. Dr. Medford gave the receptionist outside the waiting room strict instructions that no one be allowed inside until Dr. Parsons came out.

He escorted Fleur and Abigail to the small commissary on the ground floor and secured a pot of tea and some biscuits and invited them to join him. As they sat Fleur looked at the man and asked,

"What ees that all about, Doctor? 'e was so sad when 'e came out, I 'ad to do some pretty fast talkeeng. 'e told me what 'appened. 'e misses them terribly even now," Fleur said, her face a sad mask.

"Dr. Parsons is a very skilled healer of the mind. She comes from mixed parents. Her mother was a witch, her father a muggle. He was what they call a psychiatrist, a doctor that treats mental and emotional disorders. It seems that the combination of the magic from her mother's side and listening to her father talk about psychiatry helped her develop an extraordinary ability to get people to open up to her. She's very good at getting to the root of someone's problems."

"Um, Dr. Medford," Abigail began with her airy voice. "Were you able to see or feel anything that went on while Harry and I were connected?"

“Yes, indeed. It was actually quite fascinating. Of course I couldn’t tell what it was you were ‘saying’ back and forth to each other, but I could feel that the communication was taking place. Do you remember what I said about the patterns of your thoughts, how yours are so open compared to other people?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, it seems that when you both enter that place where you go, you appear to reach out and make contact. When you do Harry accepts that and the connection is made,” Dr. Medford said with a small smile. “It was odd though. I got the distinct impression that on the very fringes of your patterns there were others, very small, very faint but there nonetheless. Might that have been his family?”

“I think so,” Abigail replied sadly.

Fleur reached over and took her hand and they shared a sigh. The three sat there for over an hour and then Dr. Medford excused himself so he could check on how things were going. Half an hour later a note was delivered and it suggested they make themselves comfortable because it was likely to be a while longer. They took the time to walk to the gift shop and Fleur couldn’t manage to stifle a small laugh when she saw that a small selection of the most benign creations of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes occupied a shelf near the checkout counter. She couldn’t imagine how they had managed to talk the shop manager into carrying these items but she knew that Weasley men could be very persuasive when they so chose. After looking at every item in the store they settled on a book of puzzles and took it back to the commissary.

The puzzles were particularly challenging as they tended to change while they were being worked on. Abigail proved very adept at solving them as she seemed able to anticipate a shift. Fleur had to settle for sitting back and marveling at how Abigail was able to maneuver through the mazes, connect-the-dots and solve the word jumbles. They were half way through the book when a nurse stuck her head in the door and summoned them back to the waiting room.

When they arrived they found Harry sitting alone but when he looked up at them he smiled widely.

“Hello, my beauties. Sorry we took so long. We sort of lost track of the time,” he said.

“Are you ok, Harry,” Abigail asked as she hurried over to him.

“Not bad at all. My voice is a little raspy. I don’t remember ever talking that much. But other than that, I’m feeling pretty good. Did you two have lunch? It must be mid afternoon by now and I’m starving.”

“We ‘ad some tea and biscuits, ‘arry, but that was per’aps two or more ‘ours ago,” Fleur said as she closely watched his face for any sign.

“Ok, then. Let’s go to the Leaky Cauldron and I’ll treat you to lunch. Dr. Parsons said she and Dr. Medford need to go over what they found out today and they’d be in touch. I mean it’s not like we’re dealing with an illness here so it’s not a big deal if we need to wait a bit for any answers.”

He motioned them to go ahead of him out into the corridor and they were on their way to the Cauldron and a rather pleasant afternoon. Neither Harry nor the young ladies would have been in such a good mood if they had been privy to the discussion that was going on between the two Healers as they left St. Mungo’s.

“The young man is a ticking time bomb, Dr. Medford. You are aware of that, aren’t you?”

“I know he has been subjected to enormous stresses in his life, but there’s so much will and determination there. What makes you think it’s as dire as all that, Dr. Parsons.”

“He told me some pretty amazing things, Doctor. I mean we all know something of his life’s story. He gave me a lot of details but it’s not just what he told me but how he told me. The words he used and how he used them. Not to mention the expressions on his face when he said them. The intensity of the feelings that he radiates, especially

with his eyes. I need to think about this for a bit but I believe I need to talk with his family, at least several members of it. I know you talked to them after that incident with the girl falling from her broomstick but I believe this to be much more important for them to understand.”

“If you think it’s necessary, I’ll make the arrangements. Just let me know when you’re ready.”

The Saturday following the examination at St. Mungo’s was another gathering day at the Burrow. The burgeoning Weasley clan had taken to using the day to come together to share what they had been up to during the week and reacquaint themselves with Molly Weasley’s cooking. She didn’t mind at all since thanks to Harry’s Christmas present she had the room and the well equipped kitchen to mount serious assaults on the collective appetites that arrived in the backyard by noon. She also had the assistance of a very enthusiastic cook’s helper.

At this particular time the helper was up to her elbows in flour as she prepared a mass of dough that would, when baked, provide the light flaky rolls that had quickly become her specialty. While she was becoming quite competent with other aspects of cookery it seemed she was something of a natural pastry chef. It was generally agreed that whoever the lucky fellow was that snared her, he was destined to have a serious weight issue if he wasn’t careful.

It was only midmorning but the preparations for the mid afternoon meal were well under way. Arthur Weasley was a bit sulky at the way things were working out but Abigail had been fairly adamant when she insisted that her first obligation was to help Mrs. Weasley with the baking and then she could go ‘play’ with him in the shop, working on the pile of parts that had once been a rather bedraggled 1955 Ford Popular.

Out in the yard Harry, Ron and Ginny were lounging on the battered old chaise lounges. It was obvious that the improved fortunes of the Weasleys should have resulted in new chairs but these were like old friends and no one had the heart to get rid of them.

“Why no match today, Gin?” Ron asked. “I thought you pretty much played ever Saturday.”

“It’s the way the schedule works out, Ron. Odd number of teams so someone has to sit out a Saturday now and then. I don’t mind at all. It’s nice to have the whole weekend off.”

Harry was lying back in his chair staring out towards the open field but not really seeing anything. Ron looked at Harry and then back at Ginny and made a gesture that implied something like ‘what’s with him’. Ginny just shrugged.

“What’s up, mate? You look like your trying to count the leaves on the trees.”

“What? Oh, sorry, Ron. I was just thinking is all. This business with the smugglers is making me a bit out of sorts. You’d think with what, twenty two of them in custody, at least one of them would have broken down by now and told us something worthwhile. Either they are really afraid of someone or they’ve been conditioned not to tell anything. Even with those French investigators here it’s not helping. They don’t know much more then we do. Just different places and players. I may have no choice but to bring Abigail into it after all. Either that or pump them full of veritaserum but then we couldn’t use what they said as evidence. Either option is pretty dicey.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Hermione, a welcome interruption as far as Ron was concerned. She hurried over to Ron and to his embarrassment pulled his head down and gave him a serious kiss. Ron flushed when she released him. He wasn’t very comfortable with public displays of affection, regardless of who was involved. Harry looked over at Ginny, who just rolled her eyes.

“Hi, Harry, hiya, Ginny,” she said enthusiastically. “I got some good news this morning, Harry. The Goblins are prepared to submit a proposal to us by the end of next week. This was a lot sooner then we thought possible.”

“They’re probably worried we’ll change our minds on ‘em,” Harry said with a rueful grin.

“Harry, they wouldn’t suspect you of doing something like that to them,” she said with a frown.

“Me, no. But don’t forget, Hermione. Professor Binn’s class was full of dirty dealings on both sides. I’m sure there are least of few of the Goblins who thinks it’s a trick of some kind and I’m just a dupe.”

“My, who woke up on the wrong side of the grump couch this morning?” Hermione asked.

“Sorry, Hermione. It’s just I’ve been banging my head up against those damn smugglers for months now and all we’re getting out of it is a bunch of foot soldiers and a warehouse full of contraband.”

Hermione could only smile in sympathy as she and Ron sat down side by side on one of the chaise lounges. Hermione kept hold of Ron’s hand.

“So, on to happier things. The wedding is all set? I can’t believe it’s only a few weeks away,” Hermione asked.

“As far as we know,” Ginny said. “The gowns for us and the robes for the guys are all taken care of. Food, flowers, music, invitations. All taken care of by the master organizer. I swear that Mum could run the Ministry all by herself if she wanted to.”

This got a laugh from them all. In the background they could hear the rattle of ancient sheet metal being tortured with hammer and dolly to overcome nearly half a century of neglect. Ron smirked and looked at Harry,

“Odds that it’ll fly?”

“Not me, mate, that’s a suckers bet,” Harry said, laughing again.

Around mid morning on the following Monday, a letter arrived by owl for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley from St. Mungo's. Molly Weasley was seated at the kitchen table having a second cuppa with Fleur and Abigail after cleaning up from breakfast. She broke the seal and read the message, her face growing more somber as she went. When she was finished she looked up at the two young women seated across from her.

"Do you two know anything about this," she said as she handed the note across to them.

Fleur took it and held it so she and Abigail could read it together. It read,

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,

Regarding the examination of Harry Potter by the undersigned it is urgently requested that a consultation be had between us to include the following members of your family.

Mr. and Mrs. William Weasley

Mr. and Mrs. George Weasley

Ginny Weasley

Ronald Weasley

Hermione Granger

Abigail Westwood

Please acknowledge receipt and inform us when this meeting may occur. If convenient we will travel to you.

Respectfully yours

Doctor Medford

Doctor Parsons

Fleur placed the piece of parchment flat on the table and looked first at Mrs. Weasley and then down at Abigail. When she returned to look at Mrs. Weasley she shook her head.

“No, Muum, they said nothing about thees to us. We told you what ‘appened. Eet ees so odd, they talked for a long time but ‘arry seemed een a good mood when we left. I do not understand.”

“All right, well, the sooner the better. Go see if you can get Bill here. I’ll contact Arthur and try and round up the rest. Let’s see if we can do it this afternoon,” she said in her best field commander voice.

As usual Molly Weasley was as good as her word. By two in the afternoon the kitchen table was occupied by the required family members. Hermione had the most difficult task. Harry had been sitting across from her in her small office when the message fluttered onto her desk. She had to keep her composure and quickly finish her business with Harry and then flee the building as quickly as she could. To her everlasting credit Harry didn’t have an inkling that something was going on or that he was the center of storm.

“Alright, Doctors. We’re all here as you requested, now would you mind explaining what this is all about?” Molly said, the tension more then evident in her voice.

“Yes, Mrs. Weasley, we will do so. First, I’m sorry we had to do this but we, especially Doctor Parsons, felt this discussion was necessary. As you may recall, Mrs. Weasley, several years ago you and I had a discussion about what I felt was going on with Harry from the point of view of his unusual capabilities.”

“Yes, I recall vividly. I was the one who had to explain it to Harry.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dr. Medford said. For a moment he had the perverse notion that he knew what it was like to be facing a mother bear whose cub had just stepped into your trap but he soldiered on.

“Well, this is not unlike that discussion. My examination of Harry and Miss Westwood turned up some interesting insights but not much of

solid fact. I'm sure you were told about what happened at the end of that examination and Harry's reaction. This is where Dr. Parsons comes in. She is a member of my department and is very experienced and skilled in diagnosing and treating mental and emotional illnesses. Now hold on," the Doctor said as he saw Mrs. Weasley's reaction. "Just as I assured you on that day that Harry was not suffering from a disease or disability I can assure you now that he is not suffering from a mental illness."

"But he is suffering from a very serious emotional disturbance," Dr. Parsons cut in.

"This is hardly news to us," Arthur Weasley responded. "Harry has been emotionally battered more than anyone we could ever expect to meet. We've all been dealing with it in one way or another for years."

This was met with nods from everyone around the table.

"I'm certain you have, Mr. Weasley. I ascertained that from my extended conversation with him and I'd like to say you've been doing a marvelous job. I'd bet my Healers robes that if it hadn't been for you all here that he would have completely fallen apart years ago. But I need to ask you? Are you aware of the depth of his disturbance, its source and its manifestation? And are you aware of the likely outcome and consequences of that disturbance if it's left unchecked," the kindly looking Healer said with a hint of steel in her voice.

Arthur looked sideways at Molly and then back at the healer and shook his head mutely.

"Well, with as much certainty that my years of experience in one of the murkier aspects of medicine will allow, I believe the following. But first I would not be remiss in referring to him as your son, would I?"

They shook their heads.

"Well, your son, the young man that has stood so strong for so long against the most insidious elements of our world is, at his core, a frightened child desperately clinging to any anchor he can find to keep himself from being swept away to what he considers to be his

own personal hell. Being alone,” she said quietly, never breaking eye contact with the elder Weasleys.

There was silence around the table until Fleur gave vent to what the others were thinking.

“Alone? ‘ow could you possibly theenk that. Look around thees table. Does thees look like ‘arry ees alone?”

“Please. I understand that you all love this young man. I applaud that because that is exactly what he needs. But you must listen to what I am saying and not what you think I’m saying. Harry isn’t alone but he is desperately afraid of being so again. Yes, I said again,” she said, her eyes sweeping around the table.

“As a boy he is raised in a household totally devoid of love. This is bad enough but in fact it was a house full of loathing. His aunt and uncle knew what he was likely to become and they despised him for it. He didn’t know why but he knew they did. I imagine some if not all of you have heard him say that Ronald here was his first friend?”

They all nodded.

“Not his best friend, or his favorite friend, which I’m sure is true but his first friend, at the age of eleven. He couldn’t have grown up more isolated if he had done so on an island in the middle of the ocean. But then he discovers he is part of a community and he comes to find friends and the beginnings of a family connection. Then along comes Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. One is his godfather and his dad’s best friend, the other another close friend of his parents. And in a short span the one is dead coming to his rescue, again someone dead for him. Lupin lasts longer but in the end it’s the same and Harry’s own godson is orphaned. I understand he has assumed financial responsibility for the little boy, yes?”

The Healer took a deep breath and continued on.

“I know I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know but I need you to understand where it leads. Harry told me about several very

telling incidents. First of all would you all agree with me that Harry has a bit of temper?"

Again, knowing nods.

"It would be more accurate to say he has a barely controlled rage. A rage directed at anyone or anything that he deems is a threat to that anchor I mentioned before. The incidents I'm referring to are the time around that first Christmas when he went after those three housebreakers. Most saw it as an attempt on him; he saw it as a direct assault on his sanctuary and his family. When he was in that warehouse in Derbyshire he reacted to a threat to the greater community but it amounted to the same thing. That Death Eater was a direct threat to all of you in his mind and you know the result. The last was just recently yes? The young Miss Westwood. Would someone please tell me what they saw that day?"

No one spoke up until Abigail softly said,

"His eyes were on fire."

"It looked like he was possessed by a demon," Ginny managed to choke out.

The Healer looked at Ginny with sympathetic eyes.

"The human mind, magical or mundane, needs no demons, young lady, we tend to make them ourselves. But your description is very apt. Harry knows this of course. I understand that he had a discussion the following day with three of his 'brothers'. When he spoke of it to me he was extremely distressed. One of the reasons our talk took as long as it did was the subject of anger management as they call it. And that brings me to the crux of my wanting to talk to you. Our young Mr. Potter doesn't give a damn about his own life where you all are concerned. No, I didn't say he was suicidal, what I am saying is that he would gladly lay down his own life if he thought it was necessary to protect any or all of you. I believe he already made that choice once before. It would be preferable in his mind to enduring the loss of another anchor. And just as importantly he would not hesitate to use his last ounce of strength to destroy anything he

considered a threat. Considering how much strength that might be can you imagine the results?"

She could see this idea was sinking in.

"Dr. Medford once warned you that Harry's strength could pose a serious threat if he didn't learn how to use it properly. The issue now is he knows full well how to use it, the question is can he control himself?"

She sat back in her chair, having said all she could think to say. Harry's family sat in stunned silence. The things they had been dealing with, as Mr. Weasley had said, were merely symptoms of a much deeper issue that none of them had seen. Fleur, who had been huddled into the protective circle of Bill's arm leaned forward and asked in a much more subdued voice than before.

"Dr. Parsons, did 'arry mention een your deescussion what 'e and I talked about when we were at Beauxbaton?"

"Are you referring to what he called your dust up about his fears of taking the same path as Riddle that led to Voldemort?"

Fleur nodded.

"Yes, he did, but I'm afraid he didn't tell you everything, Mrs. Weasley. What he said about being afraid of slipping into that arrogant willful mode that he associates with Riddle isn't the whole truth. What he truly fears is that if he went that way it would separate him from all those that he holds so dear. He saw Riddle as a lone figure standing on some pinnacle, adored but feared by his followers and who held himself to be so far above them as to be alone. That is the true basis of his fear and that leads to his self deprecating tendencies."

Dr. Parsons looked more closely at Fleur and then said,

"I'd like you to understand something, young lady. With all due deference to your mother-in-law you represent an incredibly strong mother image for Harry," Seeing Fleur's confusion she continued on. "Yes, I know, he always refers to you as his big sister but remember

for many children an older sister is seen as a surrogate mother figure. In Harry's case it is understandable. He has seen his mother in pictures, the mirror of Erised, yes I know of that, and then those images in his mind. He doesn't see his mother as she would be now, a woman in her forties, but of the young woman she was just before she died. You look nothing like her but you represent much that he would wish to see in her."

Fluer settled back into the circle of Bill's arm.

"What are we supposed to do," this came from Angelina.

"Much the same as you are now. He needs to know that he is part of a large, loving family that cares about him and appreciates that he cares intensely about them. Don't hesitate to show him that he is loved. He confided to me that he has no idea why he is subject to so many hugs but he wouldn't trade them for the world. Don't allow him to brood about anything. He may appear to want to be left alone but what he really desires is someone to share with. Just about anything," she said and then she looked at Ron.

"I understand that you two used to play quite a lot of wizard's chess."

"Yes, ma'am," Ron replied. "He gave me a beautiful set that one Christmas. I keep it up in my room. We don't get the chance much anymore."

"I'd recommend you find a place for it down here. He misses playing. And another thing, if he looks like he's getting upset and his temper is building, talk him down gently. I know that most people will say it's better to let it just flare off but not when we're talking about this fellow. I understand that his fiancé is particularly adept at this," she said looking at Ginny. "He told me how you handled this latest crisis, and that's just what it was. Don't hesitate to continue that. He also said you were very good at interpreting his dreams."

Ginny went bright red and looked at her parents. Mrs. Weasley looked back at her daughter and smiled.

"Old news, my dear, don't give it a thought."

“Well, the one he was probably mentioning was about how frustrated he’s been with an investigation he has going. He was upset that he couldn’t see through some kind of fog and he was sure that something dangerous was out there and it looked like dragon fire...” she tailed off and then continued, “the dragon was the threat he couldn’t see and he was getting angry and he was going to spell it but I woke him up. His skin felt like it was on fire.”

“One last thing. As Harry discussed with the younger Mrs. Weasley he feels he has a sense of his worth. He’s wrong. He’s confusing his prodigious capabilities with a sense of humanity or esteem. Even his charitable tendencies don’t really define it. The simple fact that he can’t understand why someone wants to hug him is a more telling sign of his struggle with himself. I understand that some of you were present when he made some statements about not deserving what had come to him. And that later he said he had found a way to deal with it, yes?”

There were nods from Ginny, Hermione, Ron, George and Angelina, who had been with him on that dark afternoon in the shop in Hogsmeade.

“He dealt with it outwardly with smiles and good works to help others overcome what Riddle had done to them. He dealt with in inwardly by blocking it off. He told me of his visualization technique, very ingenious, but only as effective as his understanding of the problem, which unfortunately was and still is rather limited,” the Healer said.

“When he starts in with the digs at himself, as he put it, don’t hesitate to call him out on it but I suggest you find some gentler methods than those he described to me,” she finished.

Ginny turned red again but rallied and asked,

“Should he know any of this, Doctor? Our wedding is only a few weeks away.”

“Keep doing what you’ve always done, just look for those signs I’ve mentioned. I’m going to contact him and suggest we keep up with our

discussions, perhaps every other week. I'll suggest it would be helpful to relieve his work related stress. The wedding should be of great therapeutic value. It will help cement his connection to his, this, family. After you've come back from your honeymoon trip we can work out how to bring this all to his attention. He is, at the bottom of it all, a very intelligent young man and presented properly I'm sure he can come to a full understanding," she said looking around the table and then she let out a long sigh and smiled ruefully.

"I understand what Albus Dumbledore's purpose was when he placed Harry with his aunt and uncle but I can't help wonder how he might have turned out if he had been placed in a more loving, supportive environment."

"We did offer," Molly said, "as did a number of others."

"Well, I understand this has been a great deal to lay at your doorstep so to speak, but we felt it was something you all needed to be aware of. I sometimes envy the healers who just need to set a bone or heal a wound," Dr. Medford said.

"We want to thank you for coming to us like this, Doctors," Molly began. "I apologize for my earlier attitude. You just caught us by surprise is all."

"I understand completely, Mrs. Weasley. I know that we've painted a pretty dire picture but I must say after being here with you today I'd never want to be someone that you all took to be a threat to Harry," he said with a crooked smile as he and Dr. Parsons rose.

Mr. Weasley showed them out while the others sat around the table in silence. Hermione was the first to break the silence.

"It's like he's some kind of hero from a Greek tragedy," she said quietly.

When she saw the uncomprehending looks she explained the fundamental idea of the tragic hero who succeeds in his great deed but instead of a reward he is fated to suffer some sort of torment.

“Perhaps, but this is no play. We just show him the love and support we always have and keep an eye on him. Let’s try and be around him as much as we can. If he questions it just tell him we know he’s under some strain with his work and the upcoming wedding and we just want to be there for him.”

“I know there’s one thing I can do for him,” Abigail said in barely a whisper. “I’m going to look at every one of those smugglers and I’m going to peel them like an onion. I don’t care what Harry thinks, there can’t be anything more frightening in their heads then what I saw when he was walking towards that man that grabbed me.”

“That’s very admirable, dear, but what if he refuses to take you to them.”

“I’ll talk him into it. I’ll start crying if I have to. Fleur said that almost always works.”

“Abigail,” Fleur blurted out. “Mon Dieu, do not give away secrets.”

The brief laughter broke the tension but it was still some time before the family meeting adjourned.

The following Saturday rolled around and once again the Weasleys were gathering at the Burrow to enjoy another day of good weather and family. Ginny was going to be late as she had a match that afternoon and Ron was going to have to leave early as he had a night shift to pull at Hogsmeade but right now he and Harry were seated at the kitchen table, the beautiful wizards chess set between them. As usual Harry was losing but he was putting up a spirited fight.

“This is great, Ron. We haven’t played in months. What made you think of it?” Harry asked.

“Well a few of the Patroller trainees play and there’s one grizzled old Auror who does as well. You wouldn’t know it to look at him but he’s got a mind like a steel trap. He pounces on any mistake and makes you pay dearly for it. I’ve played him a few times and he says I give

him a real run for his money. Even Ms Muntab has stopped by and watched us play. It just reminded me we hadn't touched the board in a while."

"I'm glad you remembered," Harry said with a smile.

Harry was more than mildly curious, however. He had noticed a significant upswing in familial contact over the last few days. Not that he minded, he was always happy to have one or more of his family around but it just seemed to be an almost constant at the moment. Mr. Weasley had him come up for a talk about how the reorganized department was running. Ron had delivered some reports from the Patroller trainers and spent a few minutes shooting the breeze. Hermione had stopped by on several occasions to discuss some aspect of their joint project and while not hugging him as she had on that first day in the Director's office, there was always a smile and a hand squeeze when she left. On two separate occasions Harry had taken a turn around Diagon Alley and both times George and Angelina had insisted he come in for chats and from Angelina a cuppa.

This didn't include the attention from Ginny and Abigail when he was home but that was always pretty extensive anyway. Oddly, Abigail was getting pretty insistent about being allowed to view the smugglers. Last night he noticed her lower lip had started to quiver and he promised he would think about it and tell her Monday what he was going to do.

Now, Dr. Parsons had been right about Harry in that he was a very intelligent fellow. But what she didn't realize, since she didn't know him all that well yet, was that he also had excellent powers of observation and was a pretty fair mathematician and the numbers were starting to add up. So by the time the mid afternoon dinner had rolled around he had an idea what the sum total was. He waited until they were working on dessert when he said in an almost offhanded way,

"So, I imagine that the healers had something pretty interesting to tell you earlier this week."

It got so quiet that garden gnomes rustling in their hedge hideaways were loud by comparison. Arthur Weasley was the first to recover.

“What makes you think that, son?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just noticed that you all were being just a bit more attentive this last week. Not that I mind, it just got me to thinking. It was a few days after what happened at St. Mungo’s. I realize that I pretty much poured out my life story to Dr. Parsons and I’d have to think that there had to be something there for her to see. I’ll be the first to admit I’m a few knocks away from being a basket case. So, does anyone here get to tell me what’s up or do I have to wait until next week. Dr. Parsons sent me a message the other day suggesting I come in for another little talk.”

Harry let his eyes roam around the table and a few voices began to compete for his attention, included two Mrs. Weasleys and a soon to be Mrs. Potter. Ron simply stood up and came over to stand behind Harry and he put a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, mate. Let’s go take a walk.”

Harry looked up over his shoulder at his first friend and nodded. He stood up and the two walked away from the table, where every eye was fixed on their retreating backs. They went out onto the road and walked to the furthest limit of the Weasley property where there was still a wall. Ron motioned for Harry to take a spot where he could rest against it and then the conversation began. Ron talked and Harry listened. Occasionally Harry would interject either with a comment or question and Ron would continue on. At several points Harry folded his arms across his chest and hung his head as if he was examining the ground at his feet but it would only be from a moment then he would look up into his friend’s face and the conversation would continue.

After a while Harry looked back over his shoulder and focused on Ginny. She looked right back at him and finally Harry beckoned her to join them. She popped up and hurried over to where her brother and the love of her life faced each other in silence. When she got nearer she slowed down and Harry reached out his hand and pulled her into

a one armed embrace and Harry spoke to her. Those who remained at the table could see Ginny nodding and looking at Ron who nodded in return and then there was more discussion. Finally, as the evening sky began to fade to darkness Harry released Ginny and stood up and walked a few steps away from them. He was looking up into the sky. After a moment Harry looked back over his shoulder and appeared to be saying something to Ron. After Ron answered Harry just nodded and gave his head a bit of a toss to indicate Ron should leave. Ron hurried back to the table.

"I explained everything to him. I think he understands what's going on. He wanted Ginny to confirm a couple of things, especially that whole Hogsmeade business. He remembered I'm due for duty in a few. Told me I better get going or he'd write me up," Ron said with a grin. "He said he'd be back in few minutes. Gotta go."

"Well done, son," Mr. Weasley said as Ron stepped back with a grin and then popped out of sight.

They turned their attention back to Harry and Ginny. Harry once more beckoned Ginny and she stepped up to Harry and he wrapped her in a full hug that she returned. It appeared that he was saying something to her and she was nodding in return. Then with his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist they walked slowly back towards the diners. As he neared the end of the table he looked at each face at the table. He stopped for moment on the face of Percy's recently introduced girlfriend, Audrey. He wryly thought to himself she must be wondering what she had gotten herself into. When he was done he smiled that signature half grin and said quietly,

"If someone told me there was a better group of people a bloke could call family I'd call him a liar. I'm not going to say I'm sorry because that gets tedious and beside it annoys Dad, but I will say that I appreciate everything you've ever done for me, from the first time Mum gave me directions on how to get to the platform to my first real Christmas present. I still have that sweater in my closet, Mum. Maybe now that we have some idea what's going on things might not be so dramatic but I can't promise that. I can't imagine my not going off the deep end when one or more of you might be at risk but I will try to get it under control," then he looked back at Audrey. "Percy's a great guy,

Audrey, and this is a great family. I hope when you and I get to know each other better you'll understand what's been going on."

He then looked at his parents, who, by every definition, were indeed that.

"Mum, Dad, I hope you don't mind but I think I'd like to stay here tonight. Stay up late and talk. I don't think this is a time for private introspection."

"Yes, you certainly can and no it isn't," Mrs. Weasley said.

As if that was a signal those seated at the table rose and came to offer their support to Harry with hugs and words. He thought Fleur was going to crack his ribs but he wasn't about to complain. Even the Weasley brothers offered embraces to their black haired brother. The last was Abigail whom he lifted bodily off the ground so that her feet were dangling. When he set her down he lifted her chin with his finger and said,

"You'll come to work with me on Monday. But if I don't like the way its going I call it off, agreed?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, quietly but with a fierce determination.

It was a warm clear night so they all took seats again and started a conversation that in one form or other, was to last a life time.

I wanted to take a moment to convey a few thoughts to those of you who have been reading my story. First and foremost "THANK YOU". I enjoy knowing you're appreciating my writing almost as much as I enjoy writing it. I particularly appreciate the time you take to post a review to let me know what you think. In regards to those comments I'd like to offer you the following:

For those of you who've asked for posting dates I really can't do that. Between job and family I write as I can and since I don't have any real plan for each episode I don't really know when I'll be done with a segment so I can't really put a date at the end of one chapter as to when you can expect the next.

The length of each episode seems to be a love/hate sort of thing. Some of you like them long, others don't. More frequent posting of shorter chapters seems like a way to approach it but my head doesn't work that way. I just start writing and let the particular story line carry me along til I think it's done and that's where I stop.

As to the end of the story, nope, haven't come close. I realize chapter 17 seemed to suggest an ending but in fact merely stated something that would continue for a long time. There is plenty of story left to tell. You don't think I'd pass up telling you about the wedding of the century or the unfolding tale of a deep dark criminal conspiracy do you? 8^).

Lastly, thanks to JKR for providing such a rich foundation to build upon and to my son, Brian, for introducing me to this website. Now on we go...

Harry's Future, Part 18

Harry sat on a hard wooden chair in the makeshift conference room also known as the Aurors' break room. The small wall opposite from where he was sitting was covered with a large sheet of parchment that had been spliced together from smaller sheets with a lot of tape. Milligan was standing to one side explaining the collage of pictures, connecting lines and small paragraphs of smaller writing. On the table in front of Harry was a book as thick as the London phone directory.

The briefing had been going on for over an hour and Harry's head swam with names, places and dates.

"So, chief, as you can see the smuggling operation was, or perhaps still is, intended to be a revenue generator for an organization which appears to have its roots with Durmstrang. Our friend from the potions shop was a second level operative, Travers was apparently trying to work his way in as the last of the Voldemort gang and that little git, 'the source', now known to us as Philbus Hammersmith had been acting as a go between for the Death Eaters and this east European gang. What we don't know at this point is how extensive the network on the continent is but apparently these three characters here are well known to the investigators from France and messages have already been dispatched to Minister LeClerq," Milligan concluded.

It was late in the morning on the Wednesday before his wedding and Harry was having a hard time focusing on what was being said. Considering the breadth and depth of the criminal conspiracy that was being described to him, he was having a difficult time believing that Abigail had been able to ferret out so much information and he said so.

"Ah, that was the beauty part of it all, chief," Milligan replied with a smirk. "Once she had been able to peel the first half dozen or so like onions, as she put it, we just presented the information to the others as if their comrades had finally cracked, it all started coming out. Guess they figured it might go easier on them in court if it looked like they were cooperating. I had four investigators at a time taking down information. These pictures were drawn by the young lady, taken from the head of Markovic, that's the potion shop guy, and Hammersmith. He didn't know their names but they were recognized by our French guests."

"I guess I didn't have so much to worry about. I figured Abigail would be seeing all kinds of nasty things in their heads," Harry mused.

"Oh, I'm sure she did. Between the expressions on her face as she was 'peeling' them and the things she relayed to my guys writing it down it wasn't pretty but she's a tough little character," Milligan said.

"Speaking of the tough little character, I haven't seen her since I brought her in today. Where is she?" Harry asked.

Milligan stood there looking at Harry and scratching his head.

"Well, sir, it seems that some of our hard boiled Aurors are a bunch of pushovers. They figured they wouldn't be seeing much of her now that we've gotten all this so they're throwing her a little 'thank you' party of sorts," he said.

"There's more than one way to peel a hard boiled egg," Harry said with a little laugh.

"Yes, sir. All she has to do is look at you with those big eyes and she's got you hooked like a codfish. I'll tell you this, chief. If she really wants to come to work here she'd put me and my folks out of business," Milligan said with a laugh.

"I doubt that. There's usually more than enough crime to go around but she'd sure make the tough cases easier to crack. She's still trying to convince me it's a good idea but I'm not sold yet," Harry said with a small smile. "Well, good job. I guess I can get married on Saturday with out any distractions now. I'll be in my office. See if you can find Abigail and let her know where I am."

"Yes, sir."

Harry took up his cane and made his way back to his office. He had been paying particular attention to his knee over the last week, taking it easy, avoiding any stress and doing everything the therapist told him. He was bound and determined to be in as good a shape as possible on Saturday so that he and Ginny could dance like they did at the Halloween dance during their seventh year. He had a session that afternoon and then another on Friday. He entered his office and before he could even sit down he heard a voice from behind him.

"Well, Potter, that was quite a breakthrough you fellas had. Too bad it took a fourteen year old child to make it happen."

Harry turned around and saw a short, stocky wizard named Ellington standing in the doorway. Harry let out a sigh because he found this particular wizard to be a great source of irritation. He was one of the 'spooks' from the Mysteries department and unlike most of those that worked in the murky basement of the Ministry who simply went about their business in quiet secrecy, Ellington seemed to revel in the idea that he knew things that you didn't.

"I don't care where the information comes from, Ellington, as long as the job gets done. Is there something I can do for you or is this just a social call?" Harry asked trying to keep his voice level and his rising irritation in check.

"Just passing by, Potter. But I'd be careful if I were you. If half of what we hear about that little girl is true, Mysteries might have to step in and..." Ellington tailed off and the smirk dropped off his face.

"Understand this, Ellington," Harry said, his voice so low it was more felt than heard, "you and the rest of the spooks down in that murky hole you work in better forget that girl even exists."

Harry was standing next to his desk, his right hand on his cane, his left on the desktop. He glared at the unpleasant little wizard and took a step forward.

"If I hear that you've so much as looked at her again I'll come down there and you'll think that oversized lizard you have in bits and pieces came back to life. There won't be a magic door left on its hinges. Remember, I got in there once before, so I can do it again but I won't be nice about it."

Ellington was rooted to the floor but he was leaning back, with sweat pouring down his face as if he was standing in front of an open bake oven.

"So take my advice, Ellington. Get the hell out of my office and mind your own damn business," Harry ground out.

As if he was released from a spell the little wizard hastily backed out of the office doorway until he banged off the wall opposite and then

scrambled down the corridor towards the elevators. Harry began to take deep breaths and closed his eyes trying to calm down. He stepped backwards a few paces and sat down in his chair.

With his eyes still closed he leaned his head and rested it on the chair back. He was more upset with himself for letting that arrogant fool get him so wound up then at the idea that they would actually try and get their hands on Abigail. But with the spooks you never really knew for sure. He didn't really know how long he sat there until he heard a familiar voice from the doorway.

"Hello, Harry," Abigail said.

Harry looked over towards the door and smiled.

"Hello, little one. Did you have a nice morning?"

"Oh, yes," she said as she slid into a chair on the other side of Harry's desk. "I got a chance to see all the Aurors that were here and some of the Patrollers. I promised that I would come back and see them before I went back to Hogwarts. I hope that's ok with you, Harry."

"That's just fine, Abigail. I got a chance to see what Milligan and the rest were able to put together with your assistance. You were really a big help. I know I've asked before but I will again anyway. Are you alright? Nothing scary, no nightmares?"

"No, Harry, again," she said with a little grin.

"Hey there, little one. Guardian, remember. I'm supposed to worry about you."

"I know, Harry, but you don't need to worry about this. It's not a problem," she said in her airy voice. "But there's a problem with you, isn't there. I can feel it."

Abigail sat back and looked at Harry. Then she looked down at the top of the desk where Harry had put his hand down while confronting the 'spook' Ellington. There was a faint but clear image of a hand

singed into the worn finish. She looked back up at Harry and her eyes got that unfocused look.

“Oh, Harry. You didn’t,” she said. “Please, you’ve got to stop getting so upset about these things. A simple punch in the nose would have gotten your point across without damaging your furniture,” she finished with a perfectly straight face.

Harry looked at her for a moment and then they both started to laugh. At this point Harry’s assistant, Tom Medford knocked on the door frame.

“Um, excuse me, sir. Could I get your signature on these?” Tom said waving a handful of parchment.

“And these would be?” Harry asked.

“Oh, the first two are requisition forms for equipment and furnishings for the Hogsmeade Patrollers station and the rest are your countersignatures for the weekly reports.”

“Sure, let’s have them,” Harry said holding out his hand

Tom came up alongside Harry’s desk and handed his boss the sheaf of parchment. He happened to glance down and noticed the handprint on the desk surface and frowned. He felt a tingle on the back of his neck and tried to nonchalantly look behind him. He saw Abigail sitting there looking up at him with those big dark eyes.

“Oh, hello, Ms. Westwood. I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there,” he said with a small smile.

“That’s ok, I’m just waiting for Harry to take me home to the Burrow. How do you like your new job?” she asked.

“Very much, Ms. Westwood,” Tom said glancing down at Harry who was just finishing up signing the paperwork.

“Here you go, Tom. I’m going to take Abigail here back to the Burrow then I’ll take a turn around Diagon Alley. Then I have to report to

Saint Mungo's for my therapy session. Anything comes up Maxwell can handle it."

"Yes, sir. Nice to see you again, Ms. Westwood."

"Bye, Tom," Abigail said with a smile.

Tom left the office, papers in hand. Harry looked at Abigail and said,

"You ready to head for the Burrow?"

"Yes, sir. I promised Mr. Weasley I'd work on cleaning out the inside of the car. There was a lot of rust in there."

"Ok, let's go," Harry said and together they made their way up to the lobby to the fireplace set aside for those employees that used the Floo network. They each took a handful of powder and Harry said,

"Ladies first."

Abigail giggled and threw down the powder, said 'the Burrow' and stepped into the green flames. Harry waited a few heartbeats and then did the same. When he stepped out of the fireplace in the Burrow, Abigail was already moving towards the kitchen table where lunch was waiting.

"Harry, dear. Wonderful to see you. How are you holding up?" Molly Weasley said.

"Doing great, Mum. Little one here put a major dent in that bunch of smugglers. It looks like we've got the beginning of a trail to who they've been working for as well. Not to mention she has all those hard bitten Aurors wrapped around her little finger," Harry said with a smile.

Abigail started to giggle as Mrs. Weasley looked at her with raised eyebrows. Harry took his place at the table and the three of them began to eat. Mrs. Weasley looked at her 'son' and said,

“That’s all well and good, dear, but I was referring to the wedding. Are you ready for Saturday?”

Harry looked at his ‘mum’ and smiled and then said,

“Yes, Mum, I’ve been ready for this for a long time.”

After lunch Harry Disapparated to Diagon Alley and took a slow stroll up and down the pavements. As he walked along he thought it would have been nice to have spent some time as a Patroller trainee working each day here or at Hogsmeade or at least spending time doing what he originally intended, being a true Auror. He let out a long breath and decided to drop into the Ice Cream Haven. As he walked in he could see there was a fairly large number of customers and that the weekend workers were being kept busy during the week now. It was obvious that they were too busy for Angelina to break away so he gave her a wave and then left the store.

As he stood out on the pavement it occurred to him that he was just wasting time because he couldn’t stay focused on anything. The idea that in less than seventy two hours he and Ginny would be married kept pushing everything else to the side. He shook his head and made his way to the back of the Cauldron and then Disapparated back to the Ministry. When he got down to his office he found a message requesting he make his way up to the Ministers office when he returned. So Harry turned around and made his way up to Shacklebolt’s office.

“You can go in now, Mr. Potter, they’re waiting for you,” the elderly secretary said.

‘They’ Harry thought to himself. He hoped it wasn’t going to be another reporter. He opened the door and stepped in.

“Ah, Harry, there you are. Come in,” the Minister said.

Harry saw that ‘they’ meant the Minister and Director Grimsson. He took a seat at the conference table where Shacklebolt and Grimsson were already seated.

“Harry, you’re looking surprisingly calm for a man so close to his wedding day,” the Minister said with a smile.

“I’ve got the easy part, sir. I just have to show up. Mrs. Weasley has been doing all the hard work,” Harry said with a smile.

“I’m glad to hear that, Harry. Abernathy and I are looking forward to what should be a very memorable event,” the Minister said and then his face took on a more serious expression. “There is, however, a more immediate and somewhat serious reason for us to want to talk to you, Harry. Shortly before lunch this morning I had the very agitated Director of Mysteries up here complaining that you threatened one of his people. Is that correct?”

“No, sir, it’s not. I threatened the entire department.”

Shacklebolt’s eyebrows shot up and he said,

“The entire department, Harry? Would you care to elaborate?”

“The individual in question was Ellington. He suggested that Abigail Westwood was of interest to them and that they might, and I quote, ‘step in’. I took that to mean they would want her as a subject of study and I informed Ellington that I wouldn’t like that idea and what the consequences would be if they tried anything in relation to the girl,” Harry said calmly, never taking his eyes off the Minister.

“Yes, I believe you suggested that you wouldn’t leave a door on its hinges,” the Minister replied straight faced.

“Harry, could it be that you simply misinterpreted what was intended to be a joke?” his boss, Director Grimsson suggested.

“Perhaps, but the way Mysteries conducts its business rarely has any humor to it, sir. And Ellington is the worst of the lot. I wouldn’t submit a hardened criminal to that bunch let alone an impressionable young woman. I think I made that clear,” Harry concluded.

“Harry, I understand your feelings but you also must understand that I can’t have senior Ministry officials threatening to lay waste to an

entire department. If it makes you feel any better I made it absolutely clear that Miss Westwood is off limits. But your reaction is of concern to us. Anything you care to tell us, Harry?" the Minister asked.

Harry tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling of the Minister's office. Then he looked back at the Minister.

"It has been explained to me that I have some issues controlling my anger where family is concerned. Abigail is family. I felt she was being threatened and I responded. I realize that what I did wasn't very professional but then again I haven't had much time being a professional so I guess I'm still learning," he said looking at the Minister and then the Director. "Maybe I'm not really suited for the job after all."

"What are you talking about, Harry? You're doing very well," Grimsson said.

"Maybe, but I still think I'm not ready for this job. I think you moved to soon, sir, at least where I'm concerned," Harry said to the Minister.

"Well, in a way you're right, Harry. It was my intention to give you at least a few years to get seasoned and show what you could do but the previous Director forced my hand when it became obvious that he was going to resist every effort I made to reform the Ministry in general and your department in particular. So that meant I needed a new Director and a new Chief. So, here we are. You're just going to have to learn on the job Harry, just like I am. Being an Auror doesn't really train you to be a Minister. So to borrow from the muggles, suck it up, Harry. We need you doing the job with a clear head. You have two days before your wedding so take them off, go home and get yourself ready. Enjoy your honeymoon and come back ready to work. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied quietly.

"Good, now go home and we'll see you on Saturday, hopefully in a better mood."

"Yes, sir," and Harry got up and left the room.

Shacklebolt and Grimsson watched as Harry left the room. Then the Director looked over at his boss.

“You don’t think you were a little tough on him, sir?”

“Harry understands tough. He already knows he has some issues to deal with. Being soft with him isn’t going to help him. Keep an eye on him but don’t get in his way. We need him to do things his way to get where we need to be.”

“Yes, sir.”

The subject of this discussion had left the Ministry building by Disapparating into the backyard of the Burrow. He walked up to the doorway that led into the kitchen and knocked before sticking his head in.

“Anyone home?”

“Harry, dear. This is an unexpected surprise. Is everything alright?” Mrs. Weasley called out.

Harry walked into the kitchen and up to his adoptive mother and gave her a big hug. As he was releasing her he heard his name being called out in a low airy voice.

“Harry!” Abigail called out.

“Hello again, little one,” Harry replied.

Abigail came up to Harry and her eyes lost their focus for a moment and when they sharpened she looked at him with a sad expression.

“I’m sorry, Harry. You got in trouble because of me.”

“What’s this, Harry? What kind of trouble?” Mrs. Weasley asked, genuinely concerned.

Harry pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and gestured that Abigail should do the same. He looked at his mum and said,

“One of the spooks from Mysteries said something that set me off. The Minister found out about it and dressed me down and sent me home until after the honeymoon. It’s not a big deal, really,” Harry said.

“Harry. What could one of those people have possibly said to make you that upset?”

“Harry was protecting me, Mrs. Weasley. A nasty wizard said something about me that made Harry very angry. Harry threatened to wreck the Mysteries department if they bothered me,” Abigail said, placing her hand on Harry’s forearm.

“Oh, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley began. “I thought you were going to try and get that under control.”

“I know, Mum, but I did say it was going to be hard where family was concerned. But it was worth it. The Minister laid down the law to the spooks so Abigail shouldn’t have any problems with them. So I can handle a little dressing down for that.”

Mrs. Weasley just shook her head and ruffled Harry’s already tousled hair. Abigail rested her head against Harry’s arm and held on to his hand with both of hers. Harry rested his cheek on the top of her head for a moment and then straightened up. Abigail lifted her head up off of Harry’s shoulder and looked at him with those big, dark, soulful eyes.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said with a sad little smile.

“You’re welcome, little one.”

Harry stood on the dais that normally held the table for the faculty of Hogwarts. Today the table was gone and instead there was an ornate wrought iron trellis festooned with flowers matching the colors of Gryffindor house. The stone wall behind was covered with flowering

vines bearing blooms that matched the Hogwarts colors. Harry looked about the Great Hall with an almost bemused distraction.

After years of turmoil and struggle, tragedy and triumph, Harry was ready to take what he considered to be his first big step into a happy future. He could see that the usual long tables for the students had been replaced with a number of round tables, covered in Gryffindor and Hogwarts colors and surrounded by the numerous guests who, like Harry, were awaiting the arrival of the bride and her attendants.

Standing next to Harry was his best man, and best friend, Ron Weasley. Behind Ron were arrayed the other ushers, Bill, Charlie, Percy and George Weasley and Neville Longbottom. Harry was dressed in his best formal robes; the black with dark gray accenting that had been so impressive during his trip to Beauxbaton. The others were in basic black.

It had been Harry's idea that the wedding be held in the Great Hall at Hogwarts because it was and would always be considered part of his second home. He wanted it to be something special for Ginny as she was the first Weasley daughter to be married in three generations. There were hundreds of guests drawn from the Weasley family, the staff of the school, its board of governors, Ginny's Quidditch Team, members of the Ministry of Magic and many, many friends from their time at Hogwarts. He also noticed the spot along the wall near the double doors was an area that had been set up that included pictures of those friends and family members who had passed on. It gave him a brief pang of regret.

The wedding was scheduled to begin at noon and Harry was drawn out of his musings when a chime sounded throughout the Hall. Since there was no big clock in the Hall he assumed someone must have magicked the sound. He focused his attention on the double doors at the back of the Hall where under ordinary circumstances the students would use to enter and exit. As the twelfth chime faded away the first member of the bridal party entered the Hall, Abigail as the flower girl. She was dressed in a pale lavender floor length gown and from a basket she began to scatter flower petals the same color as those on the iron trellis.

After Abigail had gone ten paces Gabrielle Delacour entered and Harry had to smile slightly at the sight of the younger sister of Fleur who, true to her veela heritage, glowed, literally. Next was Hermione who had gone to the same lengths to tame her usually bushy hair as she had for the TriWizards Tournament Ball. She looked beautiful and Harry could hear Ron's sharp intake of breath. Following Hermione was Ginny's friend and teammate Eleanor MacManus. She was not a beautiful young woman in the way that the Delacours or Ginny were but she possessed a slender athleticism and grace that drew your eye. Next came Angelina Johnson who, just as during her own walk down the aisle as a bride, kept breaking into a wide grin. Then there was Fleur. Harry had half expected Fleur to be glowing like a summer sunrise but she looked just like any other drop dead gorgeous young woman with long shimmering silver blonde hair and a smile that could melt your bones.

Next came the maid of honor, Luna Lovegood. All the young women wore gowns of the same pale lavender but as a mark of her special status Luna also wore a circlet of lavender flowers atop her golden blonde hair. Instead of her usually distracted expression she seemed focused and determined as if making it to the dais without a misstep was the most important thing in the world. Due to the length of the Hall all six of the bride's attendants and the flower girl were walking in file and in step and Harry thought, if only briefly that nothing looked more beautiful. Then Ginny appeared in the doorway.

Harry experienced what could only be described as tunnel vision. The Hall, the guests, the bridal party all faded from view and nothing registered but the sight of his bride to be.

She wore a traditional white gown that was cut to flatter her shorter stature. To accent her wealth of crimson hair, a short dark green cape was draped over her shoulders. Instead of wearing her hair long and straight as she usually did, it had been more elaborately done up with some thin braids and gold combs producing a tiara or crown like effect. Her face was serene with just a touch of a smile and her stride was smooth and unhurried. Harry continued to watch her as she practically glided down the aisle until he started to get lightheaded. He finally let out the breath he had been holding and gulped in some

fresh air. Ron wasn't the only one who had to remember to breathe sometimes.

By now, Abigail had reached the steps leading up to the dais and as she approached she gave Harry a smile and wink and then she turned to move to her left to begin to form the attendants' line. Gabi was struggling to maintain her sense of dignity against the overwhelming desire to smile and giggle as she usually did in Harry's presence. Hermione and Angelina each gave Harry a little smile and nod while Eleanor's eyes briefly flicked towards Charlie before she turned to join the others. Fleur made eye contact with Harry from the moment she touched the first step and her expression was soft and warm. Harry smiled back and then his eyes returned to Ginny, who was just approaching the bottom step. As their eyes met resolve crumbled and both of them broke into huge grins. Luna had taken her place just to the left and as Ginny came up to Harry he turned and they both faced the same little wizard who officiated for Bill and Fleur and George and Angelina.

Harry was doing his best to concentrate but he was having trouble staying focused on the matter at hand. From the moment Ginny was within two paces of him he was aware of a light heady fragrance that was doing a very good job of scrambling his concentration. At least some small part of his mind was paying attention so that when it came time to repeat the vows he didn't miss a beat and it brought him back to the here and now.

He and Ginny were facing each other and holding each others hands. All Harry could see were those bright brown eyes looking back up at him. They got through the vows without any stumbles and then the little wizard asked if Harry had the rings. He nodded once and then turned toward the crowd and made a gesture. From a table near the aisle about half way back to the rear entrance a small boy in a black robe began walking toward the dais with a small silver pillow held in both hands. His face was very solemn and his pace controlled and slow. Teddy Lupin was making his public debut. It was obvious that his grandmother had coached him extensively. As he slowly mounted the steps he looked up at Harry and Ginny and a little bit of a smile began to break through.

Teddy approached Ron who reached down and picked the two rings off the pillow. Having completed his mission, Teddy's face lit up in a full smile and then he shifted over a bit to stand in front of Bill Weasley. The rings in Ron's hand were unusual for a wedding. Instead of gold or silver or a combination they were actually carved from jade in a shade that matched the emerald engagement ring that Ginny wore. It was an idea that had occurred to Ginny one day as she was sitting staring at her engagement ring as she often did. The rings were fairly plain except for two runes that had been engraved in each. Hermione had suggested them to Ginny as they were symbols for health and happiness.

As the officiating wizard directed, the rings were exchanged and the final benediction recited as were the words they had both been waiting to hear for so long.

"I know pronounce you husband and wife."

The kiss they exchanged was appropriately brief but contained an energy and promise that left them both a little breathless. Then the little wizard had them face the assembled guests and said,

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my extreme honor to introduce to you for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter."

The applause and cheers were thunderous. This wedding was more than just the joining of two young people. It was emblematic of a rebirth of sorts for the British magical community. An editorial published in the prior Thursday edition of the Daily Prophet made reference to the impending nuptials as one of the signs that a new era had begun and noted that with Ginny being the first Weasley daughter in so many generations that perhaps this was a marriage preordained by fate. When it was brought to Harry's attention he snorted and said he'd ask Firenze if he had seen any road signs.

Since the wedding and reception were to be held in the same Hall the dance floor had been arranged as a large circle in the very center surrounded by tables. The aisle had cut through the tables on a line from the rear doors to the dais through that circle. Therefore the bride and groom had only a short walk to reach the spot of their first dance

as husband and wife. Harry and Ginny proceeded to the center of the circle and the bridal party fanned out to stand around the perimeter ready to join in.

“Are you going to be ok dancing, Harry? Your knee I mean,” Ginny asked quietly.

“I’ll be just fine, love. I’ve got things well in hand. We’ll be dancing all night if you like,” he said with a smile.

“Well, not all night, sweetheart,” she said in low voice with an arch look that gave Harry chills up his spine as he smiled wider.

Then the small orchestra began to play and they began to dance at a moderate pace in an elegant step and after the first playing was concluded the song was repeated and the rest of the bridal party joined in. Abigail was holding on to Teddy Lupin’s hands and moving him around in small circles much to the small boy’s enjoyment. Then there was the obligatory dance including the bride and groom’s parents, who in this case were the same people. As Harry moved slowly about the floor with his ‘mum’ she looked into those bright green eyes and said,

“How are you doing, dear?”

“I couldn’t be doing any better, Mum. I’m finally part of a real family,” he said quietly.

“Harry, dear, you’ve been a part of this family for years,” she said.

“I know that, Mum, but this makes it seem more real, more permanent. It’s like a hole has been filled and I don’t need to worry about falling into it anymore.”

Mrs. Weasley’s eyes began to tear up a bit as she smiled at her son, according to the law and according to love. When the music ended she pulled him close and gave him a big hug. What Harry did next was unplanned but something he felt he had to do after a short conversation he had had with Neville before the wedding began. He had asked Neville when he and Hannah were getting married, having

recalled the conversation they had had in the Leaky Cauldron last fall. What Neville told him was surprising and a bit disturbing.

They were already married. At the end of June Neville and Hannah had a private ceremony with just themselves, two witnesses and the little wizard who seemed to be at all the weddings for witches and wizards. Neville explained that with the situation with his parents and Hannah having lost her mother to Voldemort anything larger or more elaborate would have been too painful. Harry was determined to do something for his friends. So after the bearlike hug from his mum he took out his wand and touched it to his throat and said 'Sonorous'. He then waved Ginny over and with his arm around her shoulder he began to speak.

"If I could have your attention, everyone. I know this is a little out of order but I would expect by now you're used to me doing unusual things," he said with a half smile and everyone laughed. "First I want to thank you all for being here to share this wonderful day with us. You might not think it, but I consider myself to be just about the luckiest fellow in the world. I've been blessed with the most wonderful girl anyone could hope for, the greatest family and the best friends. Right now I'd like to share a bit more of this great day with someone who is only a few hours short of being my oldest friend. He surprised me this morning with some news and I'd like to share that surprise with all of you and share some of your good wishes with him. So, ladies and gentlemen, friends and family, I'm extremely honored to present to you for the first time in public, Mr. and Mrs. Neville Longbottom. Hannah, would you come up and join your husband for a dance?"

As the guests and wedding party all started to applaud Neville walked up to Harry, his cheeks a bit pink and said,

"Thank you, Harry. Thanks for sharing your day with us."

By now, Hannah had made her way onto the dance floor and Neville turned to join her and together they began a slow dance that kept them in the middle of the circular space with the wedding party standing around them watching. From the half circle of Harry's arm Ginny looked up at her husband with glistening eyes and said,

“That was wonderful of you, Harry. How did you find out they were already married?”

Harry whispered to Ginny what had transpired and when he was done Ginny’s hold on his arm was almost painful. After a sniff she whispered back,

“You’ve given them a very happy memory now, Harry. It’s like I’ve said before, you always know the right present to give.”

Harry smiled and managed to beat back the self effacing shrug that was almost automatic at times like this. Then they both turned to watch as their two friends finished their dance. When it was over the guests applauded enthusiastically and the young couple came over to Harry and Ginny. Hannah released her hold on her husband and came directly to Harry and threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. The sound of her crying was muffled but evident. Both Ginny and Neville were rubbing her back to sooth her. After a moment she pulled her head up to look at Harry.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said as she sniffed. “That was the kindest thing you could have done for us,” she said and then kissed his cheek. “Oh, and while I’ve got you here this is for arranging that loan for us, we know it was more then just a suggestion,” and she kissed him lightly on the lips. “You’re the best friend anyone could ever hope to have.”

Harry was a surprised at this and wondered how his secret got out but that would have to wait for another time. The orchestra was starting to play and some of the guests were coming out to dance and the party was beginning. In the hour or so before the meal was supposed to begin Harry and Ginny were partnered off with a dizzying array of attendants and guests. He danced briefly with each of Ginny’s bridal party although Fleur demanded more of his time and he was only to glad to oblige. When he was able to recover his bride from the melee they were both flushed and near out of breath so they slowed things down a bit.

“How are you holding up, sweetheart?” Ginny asked.

“Just fine, love, don’t feel a thing,” Harry replied with a smile.

Ginny gave him a funny look but then something caught her eye and she whispered to Harry.

“Harry, look over there. That’s the third time that Charlie and Eleanor have danced together,” she said with a little giggle.

“You haven’t been playing match maker, have you?” Harry asked.

“Who, me? Never. But wouldn’t that be something.”

Their conversation was cut short by the drum roll and the orchestra leader, who was also acting as the master of ceremonies, calling for everyone to take their seats as dinner was about to be served. In the time that it had taken for all the dancing the wedding trellis had been removed from the dais and the long table for the faculty had been returned to be used by the wedding party. Harry and Ginny were seated in the center with others arranged as couples on either side. Teddy was back with his grandmother and Abigail with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Unlike the free for all style of dining for the students, this meal was served in courses, each arriving already on the plate. It was a very elegant meal and it was prepared to perfection. Harry was convinced that at least for this occasion whoever prepared the meals at Beauxbaton had nothing on the kitchen staff at Hogwarts.

It was the first time that Harry could actually take stock of what was going on around him. He looked out at the guests and saw Hagrid and Madame Maxime occupying one whole side of a circular table that was set for part of the Hogwarts faculty. The extensive extended Weasley family occupied a number of the round tables and Harry could see a few of the male cousins casting not-so-casual glances to where Gabrielle was sitting. He saw his parents, the Delacours and the Johnsons at one table along with Abigail. So many people there to share this most special of days. The dinner lasted for nearly two hours and by the time it was nearly over Harry would swear he had gained five pounds. Then it was time to cut the cake. It was a towering affair of multiple layers covered in white icing and adorned

with all manner of rosettes and swirls done in the colors of Gryffindor and Hogwarts.

Harry and Ginny, followed by the wedding party, moved to where the cake was on display to one side of the vast Hall. With great ceremony, Harry and Ginny held the knife with one hand each and together made the first cut and then a second. Then Harry took the knife and used it as a serving spoon to lever out the slice of cake and placed it on a plate in front of Ginny as he had done the last several years on his birthday. He then took a fork and cut a piece from the slice and offered it to his bride who accepted it gracefully and without incident. Ginny then took the fork and likewise offered a slice to Harry who accepted it. What Harry didn't notice was that while she held the fork in one hand up near his mouth her other hand had moved to the cake and scooped up a small bit of icing on the tip of her finger and while Harry happily chewed and swallowed his piece of cake, she reached up and deposited the icing on the tip of his nose to the general amusement of all who watched.

She then reached for his tie and pulled his head down and kissed the tip of his nose, cleaning off most of the icing and then kissed him full on the lips in a long smoldering kiss that promised greater things to come. The audience applauded as the cake then disappeared, only to begin returning in slices a few moments later in front of each of the diners. This signaled the end of the formal dining and a more party like atmosphere began to develop. The music took on a lively air and people began to move about the Hall to dance and mingle. Harry and Ginny made the rounds of the table to greet guests and generally join in the fun. Hagrid in particular looked fit to burst.

"Harry, I can't tell ya how glad I am ta see this day. It's been twenty one years since ya was born and this is gotta be the happiest of the lot," he said, he smile wide beneath his bushy beard.

"Thanks, Hagrid. I know you were there the very first day I needed someone and then on my eleventh birthday and all those days afterward. You've been such a big part of helping take care of me I thought maybe you could keep on doing that."

"Whatta ya mean, Harry?"

“Ginny and I have talked it over and we’d like you to be the godfather of our first child.”

Hagrid stood there and stared down at the two of them. Harry was looking back up and smiled while Ginny nodded. They could see his eyes crinkle up in a bigger smile and then tear up a bit.

“I’d be honored ta, Harry,” he said in a choked up voice. “Thank ya, very much.”

Madame Maxime was standing nearby and she smiled and laid a hand on Hagrid’s forearm. They continued to talk for a bit more and then they continued to circulate around the room to visit as many of the guests as they could. When they approached the Weasley parents’ table they noticed that Mrs. Tonks had been invited over and Abigail had little Teddy perched on her lap and she was whispering in his ear. Whatever she was saying it had the small boy entranced. There were many hugs and kisses exchanged and Mrs. Tonks repeatedly thanked Harry for his support over the years. He couldn’t help but shrug at this point but it only got him a gentle nudge from Ginny with her hip. Their conversations were interrupted when Hagrid lumbered over and said,

“Harry, there be someone outside that wants ta see ya.”

“Is something wrong, Hagrid?” Harry asked, suddenly concerned.

“Not wrong but def’nately unusual.”

Harry took Ginny by the hand and together they made their way out of the Hall and to the big doors at the entrance to the castle. A number of guests were also trailing along behind. When they came to stand at the top of the steps Harry could see that Bane and Ronan, the Centaurs, were standing a few feet away from the bottom step. Harry was amazed that they would come this close to the school and was privately alarmed that something dreadful had happened. Harry released Ginny’s hand and hurried down the steps to stand before them.

“Bane, Ronan. Is there something wrong that brings you out of the forest?” he said, the concern evident in his voice.

“Be at ease, Serpent Slayer. We are not here due to crisis or concern, but out of respect for you on this, your mating day. Would you ask your mate to join us?” Ronin requested.

“Certainly,” Harry said, plainly relieved.

He looked back at Ginny who was standing at the top of the steps and he motioned for her to come down. Carefully she walked down to join Harry at his side. She looked up to the imposing faces of the two Centaurs, wondering what was going on. The two Centaurs took several steps back and Bane turned to his side and made a gesture. Other Centaurs began to appear on the path that led past the castle down towards Hagrid’s hut and the Forbidden Forest. Half a dozen came to stand by Bane and Ronan while the rest hung back a bit. One carried a bow and quiver in his hands.

“Serpent Slayer,” Bane began. “Long have the humans and Centaurs maintained an uneasy coexistence in this world. Few among you have we ever counted as worthy of our trust. Dumbledore was one and for decades the only. He is gone. You have come forward to fill that void. Your struggles against the great evil that was Voldemort demonstrated your worth as a warrior. Your willingness to sacrifice yourself for the good of all demonstrated your worth as a leader. We welcome you as a friend of the Centaurs and we offer you these as tokens of our respect.”

The Centaur that had been standing aside with the bow and quiver stepped forward and offered Harry the two items. Harry reached out and took hold of the bow and quiver and nodded to the unnamed Centaur who nodded in return and then backed away. As Harry looked up at Bane and Ronan all eight Centaurs rose up onto their hind legs to tower over Harry and Ginny. The small crowd that had gathered on the top of the steps gasped at the sight. The Centaurs settled back to the ground and Harry took a step forward and said,

“My friends, you have done me honor today far beyond what I could ever expect or truly deserve. The memory of this day and the gifts

you have bestowed will have a special place of honor in my family down through the generations. I only hope that my efforts on behalf of all the magical community continue to be worthy of the trust and friendship you have demonstrated today. Thank you.”

As Harry finished he shifted both items to his left hand and offered his right to Bane who accepted it in the style of the Centaurs which was to grasp the offered forearm as opposed to the hand. Harry repeated the gesture with Ronan and then not sure but daring to hope he did so with the others arrayed before him and each accepted with solemnity. When they were finished Harry stepped back to stand with Ginny again. Ronan looked down at her and his deep voice rumbled up from his chest.

“Serpent Slayer’s mate. We charge you to care for the Serpent Slayer to the utmost. He has value far beyond his understanding.”

Ginny simply nodded and said,

“I will.”

With that the larger group of Centaurs turned aside and allowed Ronan and Bane and the others to pass through and then they closed in around them and they all made their way back towards the forest. Harry and Ginny watched them go, his free right arm around her shoulder, her left arm about his waist and her right hand clutching his. She felt him begin to tremble violently. She gripped him tighter and looked up at him in alarm.

“Harry, are you alright?”

“I, I think...so,” he said through teeth clamped tight to keep from chattering. “Just the adrenaline I think. I’ll be ok in a moment, just don’t let go or I’m likely to fall on my face.”

Bill Weasley made his way down the stairs followed by Fleur and a few others. Ever mindful of Harry, Fleur could see his reaction to the emotionally charged event and she hurried to his other side and grasped his arm to lend support.

“Mon ami, ‘arry. Are you well?”

“I, I’m ok, Fleur. Just all the excitement I guess.”

“That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen or heard of, Harry,” Bill said in an oddly subdued voice. “I don’t know if they’ve ever done such a thing before. To offer you that bow and quiver is the same as saying you’re a member of their herd.”

“I think maybe I’d like to go inside and sit down for a bit if you don’t mind,” Harry said quietly.

“Of course, sweetheart. Give us a hand, Fleur,” Ginny said still clinging tight to her husband.

Slowly the three, led by Bill who helped open the way for them, climbed the steps and went into the Hall. The Hall was full of whispered conversations as Harry walked in between the two young women, the bow and quiver of arrows clutched in his hand. They walked him over to the Weasleys' table and sat him down. Mrs. Weasley was looking at her son in wonder and Mr. Weasley poured out a glass of pumpkin juice for Harry. The shaking had subsided for the most part but Harry was still a little unfocused but he could sense what was going on around him. He motioned to Bill and his older brother leaned down for a brief whispered conversation. Bill nodded and then stood upright. He pulled out his wand and touched his throat with the tip and said, ‘Sonorous’.

“Friends. Harry asked me to tell you that what occurred outside, while extraordinary, isn’t something that should dampen our joyful mood. He assures me that he is ok, just a bit overwhelmed by the honor that the Centaurs bestowed on him. He just needs a moment or two to gather his thoughts. I believe we have the Hall rented for the night and hope you all continue to enjoy yourselves.”

Harry looked around at his family who were crowded around the table. He took hold of Ginny’s hand and brought it to his lips and kissed it softly.

“Sorry, love. They just caught me by surprise is all. I’m doing fine. Wow,” he said blinking. “We’re going to have to find a special place for these,” he said referring to the bow and quiver that were now resting on the table.

“I’m thinking in your study, Harry, above the bookcase with all the books on magic you’ve collected,” Ginny offered.

Harry merely nodded. After a few more gulps of juice Harry started to feel better. He spent another fifteen minutes sitting there and then he heard a slow song begin. He looked over at Ginny with a small smile and asked,

“Dance with me?”

“Are you sure you’re ok?”

“We’ll take it slow and easy. I’ll be fine,” he said, slowly standing up and offering his hand.

She took it and rose from her chair. All eyes were on them as they moved to the dance floor and then holding tight to one another began to move slowly to the music. Other couples began to join them and as if a collective sigh had been released the mood in the big room lightened. The couples included all of the wedding party although Percy was dancing with Audrey, Neville with Hannah, while two of the younger male cousins had claimed Gabi and Abigail. The partners in the last two couples were making sure to keep plenty of space between themselves since they were being closely scrutinized by Mrs. Weasley and Madame Delacour.

Since it had been a while since the main meal, trays of snacks began appearing in the middle of each table and guests began drifting from table to dance floor and back. Harry and Ginny had come back to sit at the Weasley parents table and were helping themselves to some of the biscuits that were provided. Professor McGonagall came over to stand by them and said,

“First of all, my warmest congratulations to you both, Harry, Ginny. This has been a wonderful occasion and I and all the staff wish you all the happiness in the world,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you,” they both replied and then Harry offered, “and thanks for letting us use the Hall. It’s been absolutely perfect, Professor.”

“You’re most welcome, Harry. Now, after seeing what happened outside I took a walk up to my office and had a little discussion with my ‘roommates,” she said the last with a smirk. “As far as we can tell that was a singularly unique experience. No one has ever heard of such a thing happening before. Professor Dumbledore didn’t seem the least bit surprised but he did offer his congratulations and they all asked that you both come for a quick visit before you leave in the morning.”

Harry and Ginny, as well as any of the guests who so requested, were going to spend the night in the dorm rooms to avoid any issues with Disapparating while tired or otherwise impaired.

“Of course we will, Professor, as long as it’s not too early,” Ginny said with a perfectly straight face.

Harry turned three shades of red while the rest of the people around the table began laughing uproariously. Professor McGonagall, to her credit, matched Ginny’s expression and replied,

“In your own good time, Mrs. Potter.”

Harry's Future, Part 19

Harry lay back leaning on his elbows, the warm salt water of the Mediterranean supporting his sore left leg while helping ease the ache in his knee. It was the Tuesday following the wedding and he and Ginny were now relaxing at the seaside vacation home of Fleur's aunt and uncle. The wedding had been a spectacular success for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that he and Ginny were now husband and wife. There were other highlights as well, including the revelation that their good friends Hannah and Neville were married, as well as the Centaurs bestowing upon Harry the seemingly unheard of token of respect consisting of a bow and quiver of arrows, indicating they thought of him as a member of their herd.

But perhaps more importantly, from a personal point of view, it appeared that Charlie Weasley and Eleanor MacManus had hit it off in a big way. Ginny was feeling particularly smug about that. The whole event was concluded with a huge fireworks display courtesy of the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes company. From various locations just outside the Hogwarts grounds numerous ground and aerial displays were set off. Afterwards Harry commented to George about what it must have cost. His brother-in-law and partner figured they'd make it back and ten times more with all the exposure they had just gotten with all the wedding guests.

Harry was enjoying replaying the various scenes from the day in his mind and soaking in the water when he heard a voice calling to him.

"Harry, I want to put more lotion on you. This sun is enough to burn the hide off of a dragon. Oops, sorry, sweetie," Ginny said.

Harry looked back over his shoulder to where Ginny was sitting up on a blanket. She was sunbathing just above the waterline and now she was holding up a bottle of Madame Babineaux's Magical Sun Screen, SPF 210. Fleur was insistent that they use it otherwise both of them would be burnt to a crisp on the first day, she said.

"Ok, love, if you'd do the honors, please," Harry replied with a grin.

Ginny stood up and walked the few steps to where Harry was lounging in the water. He couldn't help but smile as he saw his wife come towards him. She was wearing a one piece, French cut swimsuit that showed off her compact, athletic figure beautifully. Her flowing mane of red hair was pulled back into a pony tail and her smile was bright and warm. She crouched down besides Harry in the warm water and began lathering on the lotion. It had the color and consistency of white ceiling paint when it first went on but quickly faded to transparency. She took care of his arms and torso, front and back and then before applying it to his face she leaned down and kissed him. When she pulled back she looked at him and said,

"How's the knee, Mr. Twinkletoes?"

Harry flinched inwardly a bit since the condition of his knee had provided a brief bump in the otherwise smooth transition to married life. Harry had been so determined that his injury would not put a damper on the wedding and reception that during his last treatment before the big day he had a talk with his physical therapist. After some cajoling and pleading, he convinced the healer to apply some magic to his knee that while not healing the injury, it masked any pain that might be felt for forty eight hours. He was warned however that whatever stress he put on it during that time would be felt after the spell wore off.

As it happened this began during the train ride in the company of the Delacours and Fleur and Bill Weasley. The Delacours were going to make sure the honeymooners arrived safely at the house while Bill and Fleur were going to spend some time on the continent before the start of the new school year. Harry's discomfort was becoming obvious just after the transfer in Paris and by the time they reached the seaside house he was hobbling as badly as he had right after his release from the hospital.

Ginny waited until they were alone before she started grilling Harry about what was going on and then she remembered what Harry had said before one of their dances about 'not feeling a thing'. When Harry admitted to what he had done Ginny's temper flared. She chastised him for putting his health at risk. She berated him for not trusting her enough to confide in her so that together they might have

figured out a different way that wouldn't have had such painful consequences. Then she pulled him to her and whispered how kind and thoughtful he was to go to all that trouble to make sure their special day was all that and so much more. Then she leaned back and looked him in the eye and extracted a promise that he would never do something like that again.

They spent that first evening together on a couch that was positioned to provide a view through sliding glass doors over the sea. Harry had his leg up, supported on pillows with Madame Promfrey's magical heat bag soaking the soreness away. Harry's back was supported by Ginny, her arms wrapped around his chest and her head resting against his and when they spoke it was in soft whispers. And later, their first night together in their cozy seaside retreat, while lacking the athleticism of their wedding night, was more than enough to wash away the anger from earlier in the day.

"I'm doing a lot better, love," Harry said in response to Ginny's question. "The sea water and rest have done it a world of good."

"Well, we'll give it another hour and then it's time for lunch. I want us out of the sun once the afternoon rolls around," Ginny said.

Instead of going back to her towel, Ginny sat down in the water and pulled Harry so he was leaning back against her. He leaned his head back on her shoulder and looked out over the water.

"Returning to work on Monday is going to be really hard after this week, love," Harry mused. "I could really get used to a life of leisure."

"Oh, I don't believe that for a minute, Harry. I'd give you maybe two weeks and you'd be looking for some mystery to solve or some villain to defeat," Ginny said with a laugh. "But you're right in a way. We have busy lives waiting for us back home. We'll have to pay attention to make sure we always set aside time for just us."

"Especially this first year with you bouncing back and forth from London to Holyhead," Harry said. "I've been giving it some thought, love. I don't know if I want to continue living in London once you're done with the Harpies."

“Where would you want us to live, Harry?”

“I was thinking of reclaiming the house in Godric’s Hollow and rebuilding it,” Harry said quietly.

Ginny said nothing for a few moments. Harry could feel her grip on him tighten as she thought about it.

“Isn’t the house kind of like a monument, Harry? Wouldn’t that be a problem?”

“That house has been in our family for centuries, Ginny. Technically it’s still mine. I don’t know of a better monument to my parents than to make it a home again where people live and laugh and love. Where children can grow up. I’d like you to come with me some weekend and we can take a look. When Hermione and I were there we didn’t get to see much,” Harry said.

“Certainly, Harry. It would be a nicer place to raise a family and it would be closer to the Burrow, too.”

“Thank you, love,” Harry said and he brought his head around to face Ginny and he leaned forward to kiss her.

It was a while before they finished. They lingered for a few moments longer and then Ginny stood up and offered Harry her hand. Slowly he arose from the water and hand in hand they walked back up to the house.

It had been their intention that their honeymoon was not going to be a frantic tourist trip but instead a quiet time to be alone together. The only deviation from this plan was a trip on Thursday to Beauxbaton to be the guests of Madame Maxime. Ginny was thrilled at the idea that she was going to be seeing the magnificent castle and grounds. So at nine o’clock that morning a black Mercedes sedan pulled up in front of the house and the driver indicated in halting English that he was there to take them to Beauxbaton. The trip was mostly on what would normally be fairly quiet roads but since this was vacation season there was a lot of traffic. However, like any good bewitched vehicle,

the black car was smoothly moving through spaces it should never have fit. Within half an hour they arrived at the Academy.

“Oh, Harry, this is incredible,” Ginny said.

“This isn’t the half of it, love,” Harry replied.

They began to walk up towards the steps to the front entrance. Harry recalled how the first time he took this trip it was with hundreds of students cheering. He much preferred the quiet approach he was making this time. As with the previous visit, however he was compelled to use his cane for support. He was still feeling the effects of the pain free wedding reception. As they got to the bottom of the stone staircase the big double doors swung wide and Madame Maxime stepped out.

“Well, Mr. and Mrs. Potter, eet ees such an ‘onor for us to ‘ave you visit. Please, entre’.”

“Thank you for having us, Madame. Ginny is very excited to see the school and I’m very happy to be back.”

“Oh, ‘arry, you are such the diplomat,” Madame Maxime said with a laugh. “I am so very ‘appy that you allowed me to be a part of your special day, yes? I ‘ave been telleeng everyone how fabliaux it was. The music, the food, the decorations, the danceeng. I will remember it always. You are a very good dancer, ‘arry. I was surprised that you were able to go for so long. But I see you are using the cane. I thought your knee must ‘ave been doing better, yes?” the Headmistress said as they walked through the majestic entry hall.

“He cheated, Madame Maxime,” Ginny said.

“Cheated? ‘ow so?” the Headmistress asked while looking down at Harry, who was turning quite red-faced.

“He had a healer at St. Mungo’s spell his knee so he wouldn’t feel any pain for two days. He’s been paying for it since Sunday afternoon,” Ginny said straight faced but her eyes told volumes.

“Oh, ‘arry. A gallant but foolish theeng to do. We will take it easy but you will tell me eef you feel any pain, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

So for the next hour or so the three walked about the palace while Madame Maxime described the various decorations, architectural motifs and practical uses found in and about the various rooms contained within the marble edifice. Then they went out a side door into one of the magnificent gardens. The whole time Ginny was looking around in awe. She finally said what she had been thinking for the last half hour or so.

“Madame Maxime, how is it that anyone can learn anything around here? It’s so beautiful, I’d never be able to concentrate.”

“Oui, Geeny. Daydreaming is a danger ‘ere so we make sure we always ‘ave a student’s attention. ‘ave Fleur tell you about that, she was a bit of a daydreamer ‘er first year as I recall,” the towering Headmistress said, laughing.

As they continued their tour of the gardens, occasionally stopping to look at a particularly beautiful display of color or intricate topiary, they eventually came around the palace and the Quidditch stadium came into view. As they looked, several flyers appeared above the rim. Harry looked up at Madame Maxime and asked,

“Are there students here already, Madame?”

“This is the last week of our two week Quidditch camp, ‘arry. Students come for intensive training to improve their skills. You have no such thing at ‘ogwarts?”

“No, ma’am, but it sounds like a wonderful idea. I might have to suggest something like this when we get back home. May we go see them?” Harry asked gesturing to the stadium.

“Oh, oui, Harry. You and Geeny are to be guests of honor at the practice matches this afternoon. Let us proceed.”

At a casual walk the three made their way to the Quidditch stadium. Apparently their arrival was anticipated and watched for because more and more flyers appeared above the rim of the stadium, all looking towards them. Finally an exceedingly loud whistle blast called them all back to whatever they had been doing. Harry was sure someone bewitched the whistle; otherwise it must have been blown by a true giant. They entered the tunnel that led under the grandstand out onto the pitch proper. As they emerged onto the grass the whistle sounded again and all the flyers spiraled to the ground and several smaller groups who were already on the ground hurried over. Harry estimated there were at least fifty students and perhaps half a dozen adults gathering around.

Madame Maxime called out in her booming voice, gesturing everyone to come close. She talked to the assembled students and instructors in French and Harry could hear his and Ginny's names mentioned and then she turned to them.

"I 'ave told them that you are our guests for the day and you are 'ere to watch their practice games. I also suggested if they were very polite you might offer them some suggestions."

"We'd be happy to watch, Madame Maxime, although I don't know what we could offer..." Harry said until he was cut off by Ginny.

"We'd be very happy to help in any way, Madame," Ginny said, giving Harry's hand a hard squeeze.

"Excellent. We have seats set aside for you in the visitors area if it is not too much of a burden for you, 'arry."

"I'll go slow, ma'am, and it should be fine," Harry said and they began the climb to the higher seats.

As they approached what could only be described as the VIP section, Harry and Ginny could see that Beauxbaton took a different approach than at Hogwarts. There was only one raised tower and it was lower than what they were used to. It provided a commanding view of the playing area without blocking those seated in the regular sections. Madame Maxime indicated where Harry and Ginny could sit. Harry

settled into a chair very similar to what he found in the faculty lounge during his first visit. He let out a very satisfied sigh.

“You are comfortable, ‘arry?”

“Yes, ma’am. I love these chairs. I need to ask where you get them,” Harry said.

“I must confess I don’t know, ‘arry, but I will find out for you. Now if you would excuse me for a moment, I need to inquire about lunch for us.”

They watched Madame Maxime leave and then Harry turned to Ginny and asked,

“Why did you cut me off like that, Ginny?”

“Because, Harry, you were going to say that you don’t know why they would be interested in what we had to say about their flyers, right?” she replied.

“Well, yeah. They have half a dozen coaches down there, what are we going to add?”

Ginny let out a sigh and then took hold of Harry’s forearm and said,

“Because, my dear man, as far as they are all concerned, we are two famous Quidditch flyers from across the Channel. I didn’t say anything to you about it but when we were over here for that tournament, the Harpies got a lot of press coverage. We were an all female team and we were holding more than our own against all those other mixed teams. They made a big fuss over me and then one of the other girls let it slip that you and I were, well, you and I, and you couldn’t believe how much they wanted to know about you. Whether you understand it or not, those young flyers look at us as very accomplished players and they are hoping that we will share our experience with them. Just like that seeker you talked to not all that long ago. She’s probably out there right now. Remember what Fleur said, Harry. They are looking to us to be teachers. You know how to do that, right?”

“Well, yeah, I do, I just didn’t think they needed us to do it,” Harry said.

Ginny looked at the bright green eyes, the open honest face with it’s serious expression and thought to herself that maybe with all that power it was better this way but he could be so exasperating sometimes.

“Just think of it as another class to teach, Harry, and do it for me, ok?”

“Ok, Gin, if you put it that way,” he replied.

Ginny smiled at him and they turned to see what was going on down on the pitch. It appeared they were foregoing a full lunch and were being served water and refreshments from tables set up on the sidelines. Just as Madame Maxime was returning with several trays floating in front of her the flyers were reassembled into groups and were pushing off into the air. Harry and Ginny divided their attention as he concentrated on the seekers and she on the chasers. Harry caught sight of Collette Dubois as she hovered with the other seekers listening to the coach that was astride his broom in front of them. He then took off and they took off after him in a line trying to track his movements. Harry had to admit he was very good.

Without really thinking about it, Harry began to concentrate intensely on what the seekers were doing. He noted how each handled his or her broomstick. When the instructor pulled out a practice snitch he captured every detail of how each student tried to follow the little golden ball and the attempts made to capture it. Then the students were divided into teams and short fifteen minute practice games were held with teams shuffling and by the time the afternoon was over all of the students had had substantial air time. As the last two teams drifted towards the ground, Harry leaned back into his chair as he had spent most of time leaning forward as he concentrated on the action.

“Welcome back, sweetheart,” he heard Ginny say.

“What? I didn’t go anywhere,” Harry said confused.

“Oh, yes you did, my dear,” she said with a laugh. “You were out there with them. After the third time trying to talk to you I gave up. Madame Maxime asked us if we’d go down and talk to the students.”

“Oh, sure. I guess there’s a few observations I could make.”

Ginny just smiled a little but inwardly she was rolling her eyes and shaking her head. They slowly made their way down to the pitch and the awaiting students. The Beauxbaton Quidditch coach was a burly man about Harry’s height who must have been a Beater in his playing days. He spoke a few words of welcome and then pointed Harry over to the group of seekers while Ginny was introduced to the chasers. The beaters and keepers stayed with this group as all three tended to play as a unit while the seekers tended to be more singular in how they played. Colette Dubois was chosen to interpret for Harry as her command of English was the best of the group. Harry made a few general comments about the quality of their play and then launched into a detailed analysis of the performance of each of the ten or so flyers.

While they and their coach were initially impressed with Harry’s dissertation by the time he had gotten to Collette as the last of the students they were collectively dumbfounded by the quantity and quality of precise and succinct commentary that Harry was providing. Each flyer received an analysis of their performance emphasizing their strengths to build on as well as suggestions for improvements where Harry saw problems. His ability to replay images in his mind allowed him to make pinpoint critiques of style, movement and technical execution. Some of the other coaches had drifted over to hear what was being said. The sun was nearing the horizon by the time he concluded with handshakes all around. When he turned around he saw Ginny and the others looking at him.

“What? Oh, I’m sorry. Did I take too long?” he said, feeling embarrassed.

“No, not at all, Harry. We were only here a few minutes, it’s time for dinner. They have us set up in the Dining Hall,” Ginny said with a smile.

In fact, Ginny and the others had been standing behind Harry for over half an hour listening to his commentary. As they walked along beside Madame Maxime a number of whispered conversations were taking place along with a lot of looks in Harry's direction.

The Great Dining Hall was set up to accommodate the relatively few diners. The head table remained the same where the Headmistress and the coaches sat along with Harry and Ginny and the other tables had been moved around so that the fifty or so students were closer together. Once again the food was extraordinary. Ginny spent a great deal of time looking around the room, admiring the ice sculptures and other features of decoration and architecture. She leaned over to Harry and said,

"It's almost like a dream, isn't it, Harry?"

"Yes, it is."

If they had been paying attention to the students in the room they would have noticed that they were being observed as much as they were doing the observing. The looks and whispered conversations were still going on with the young Mademoiselle Dubois at the center of a number of them. As dessert was being served Madame Maxime tapped her glass with a spoon to get everyone's attention.

"We would like to offer our thanks to Monsieur and Madame Potter for the 'onor of their visit and for providing such valuable insights to our young flyers. As a token of our appreciation we would like to present you with these small gifts," she said as she gestured towards the tables.

Two students rose from their seats and came forward holding small gift wrapped boxes. They were presented to Harry and Ginny across the table and each was accepted with a smile and a 'merci'. Madame Maxime gestured that they should go ahead and open them. What they found amazed them. Harried received a full sized snitch attached to a base made of dark marble. The wings unfurled as he placed it on the table and waived gently. Ginny's was a miniature

quaffle in gold on a similar base. Harry looked over at Ginny and then turned to Madame Maxime.

"This is..." he began and then he felt a small nudge from Ginny's knee. "This is very unexpected but very much appreciated, Madame Maxime. This has been a wonderful day for both of us and Ginny and I want to thank you and your staff and the students for making us feel so welcome."

"Eet ees been our pleasure, 'arry, Geeny. We 'ope that you will return to us again soon. If you can spare a few moments, the students would like to take their leave of you and then I will escort you to your car," the Headmistress said.

The 'few minutes' turned out to be more than thirty as the students crowded around the two shaking hands, asking for autographs and in one case, slipping Harry an envelope. Madame Maxime was finally compelled to shoo the students away so she could escort them to the awaiting car. With more thanks and promises to return Harry and Ginny climbed into the back seat of the sedan and with final waves were on their way back to the beach house.

"Wow, Harry. That was an amazing day. Thank you for arranging for me to see Beauxbaton. It is so beautiful."

"Yes it is. If you could only have seen it like I had with the moon shining on it. We missed that this evening," he replied quietly.

Ginny looked over at Harry who was looking out of the window at the scenery passing by.

"Are you ok, Harry? Is your knee bothering you?"

"No, no. It's feeling fine, love. I was just kind of thinking about what was going on today. It was brilliant to see how enthusiastic they were and how much they wanted to learn more. But it was scary, too, in a way. They way they look at you and hang on every word, wanting our autographs," he said.

"Harry, this isn't about the whole fan club Death Eaters thing is it?" Ginny asked.

"No, well not really, but it's easy to see how it could happen."

"Harry, have you set up an appointment with Dr. Parsons for when you get back?" Ginny asked with a little edge in her voice.

"Yes, Thursday, right after work. Why?" Harry asked.

"Please discuss this with her. It's obvious that nothing your family has had to say about this sort of thing is getting through to you, maybe a professional will have a better chance," Ginny retorted.

"Why are you getting so upset, Ginny? Don't you think this is important?" Harry asked.

"It wasn't important that a bunch of kids got a thrill out of you and I being there for them. What's important is your tendency to take everything that's good and fun and turn it into a personal crisis. You need to get it through your thick skull that you aren't the next dread lord of dark magic and your fans aren't some legion of the damned in the making. For crying out loud, Harry. People like to be around you because you are interesting and caring and for the most part a lot of fun but frankly you're starting to get a bit tedious," Ginny said, her arms folded and her eyes fixed on the oncoming view through the windshield.

That Harry was getting angry was obvious to Ginny. They were still sitting close to each other and she could feel the heat starting to radiate off of him.

"And you better get a grip on your temper or you're going to set the upholstery ablaze," she added matter-of-factly.

She heard him sputter a bit but the feeling of heat dissipated. They rode in silence until they arrived at the beach house. Harry got out of the car and using the cane, made his way to the front door. Ginny picked up both gifts and followed along behind. Harry walked straight through the house and out onto the balcony that overlooked the sea.

Ginny chose not to follow him. She sat down in a chair that allowed her to see him but gave him his privacy. She recalled what Dr. Parsons said about not allowing him to brood but her own instincts told her that Harry needed some time to work through whatever was going on inside him at the moment.

It's was perhaps a quarter of an hour later when he turned around and came back into the living room, sitting down on the couch where he could rest his leg but look at Ginny. She looked back at him calmly, inviting him to open the discussion she knew was coming.

"Do you think I'm losing my mind," Harry asked quietly.

"What are you talking about, Harry? Of course not," she replied. "Why would you think that?"

"How else can you explain the way I behave," Harry responded. "I have every reason to be happy and I keep pulling these stunts."

"You're not crazy, Harry. You're confused and afraid, but you're not crazy," Ginny began. "You know what Dr. Parsons said about you, Harry. I know Ron told you all about that. You're so convinced that somehow you're going to do something or something is going to happen to you, or to us, and you'll wind up alone. So everything you do is to try and keep that from happening. On top of that, you've made yourself paranoid that somehow you're going to turn into a new Voldemort or Grindelwald or whatever and that's starting to influence everything you do. You see a bunch of awestruck, adoring kids and you figure they're Death Eaters in training. Now that is crazy."

See paused and looked at him closely and a thought occurred to her.

"You know, Harry. If you keep on this way you are in real danger of making your worst fears come true."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you keep going this way you stand a very good chance of pushing away anyone and everyone that is close to you. People only have so much patience you know,"

Ginny said.

Harry looked down into his lap, his hands clasped together.

“Even you?” he said, not looking up.

“Well, maybe not me, but I’d be so miserable you wouldn’t want me around anyway,” Ginny said. “Sweetheart, your fears have no foundation. Don’t give me that look. Yes, I know all about your history. I lived through some of it and you’ve told me so much of the rest. I can understand why you wouldn’t want to return to that life but listen to me. You are part of a big, tough family who has and will continue to stand by you, if you’ll let us. You have loads of friends and even more people who look up to you and admire you for all you’ve done and what you are likely to do in the future. But you have to get rid of this ridiculous notion that it’s all going to be taken away from you. Or you’re going to make it all go away somehow. If you feel you need to be protective of us, that’s fine. But stop this nonsense about fan clubs and air valves and all the rest of it.

“I remember you telling me about the talk you had with Professor Dumbledore after you got us all out of the Chamber of Secrets. And what he told you about your concerns about how much you had in common with Tom Riddle. Do you remember what he said?” she asked.

Harry hesitated then he looked up and said,

“He told me the difference was the choices we made. That life was all about choices.”

“So look at the choices you’ve made in your life, Harry. Just sit there and think about the choices you’ve made. I know the results of a few didn’t turn out how you wanted them to but think of the reasons why you made them and tell me if any one of those in any way would have been a choice that Riddle would have made,” she said intently.

Harry sat there sideways on the couch; his left leg propped up, his right foot resting on the floor. He looked at Ginny’s face, her eyes

intent but otherwise appearing very calm and determined. He hesitated a moment then said,

“No, I can’t think of one.”

“I didn’t think you would,” she said as she stood up and approached the couch. “Budge up there, Harry.”

She sat down behind her husband and wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back so he was leaning against her as she settled into the corner of the couch. He had to admit it felt warm and comforting.

“I’ll give you some time to think about it, Harry, but you won’t do it alone. We’ll stay like this all night if we have to,” she said, then kissed the top of his head and settled a bit more into the couch.

At some point they both fell asleep and Harry remembered that his dream was an odd one. It wasn’t like a usual dream with things happening. He just felt like he was floating somewhere, feeling safe and protected. Some time around dawn one or the other woke up and in so doing woke up the other. Ginny whispered in Harry’s ear and he nodded and pulled forward a bit. Ginny stood up and then helped Harry stand. They walked hand in hand to the guest room they were using and didn’t come back out until around lunch time.

Monday morning saw Harry back in his office in the Ministry staring at a framed picture on the wall. He and Ginny had returned from the honeymoon late on the previous Saturday and when they paid a visit to the Burrow on Sunday it was apparent that a plot had been hatched and executed. All of Ginny’s siblings were present as were their significant others. The younger Mrs. Weasleys, Fleur and Angelina, were there. Also Hermione, Percy’s girlfriend Audrey and much to Harry’s, but apparently not Ginny’s, surprise, Eleanor MacManus. Abigail was there of course, having spent the week while Harry and Ginny honeymooned.

Also in attendance was a photographer equipped with the latest in magical photographic equipment. It was a copy of the photo that this

wizard had taken that Harry was looking at. The photographer was able to take a shot, then process and print copies right then and there. He had taken a number of different shots for various family members but the one that Harry was looking at was, in his mind, the crown jewel.

Harry was sitting dead center in a sea of family. To his right was Ginny, to his left was his 'mum' Mrs. Weasley, both seated. Behind Ginny was Fleur with a hand on Harry's shoulder and Hermione likewise from behind Mrs. Weasley. Abigail was standing directly behind Harry, her arms around his neck and her cheek pressed against the side of Harry's head. Mr. Weasley was standing next to his wife and Bill was next to his. Ron was standing behind Abigail with Charlie and Eleanor to one side and Percy and Audrey to the other. On the ground in front of Harry were George and Angelina.

Harry couldn't help but smile since as with any magical photo the subjects were giving him little winks or waves or in the case of George and Angelina, crossed eyes and other silly little gestures. He was presented with three copies, two full sized and one pocket sized in a small leather case. The other full sized one was on the wall of his study and the small one tucked into the pocket of his robe. Ginny told him these were to remind him that being alone was something he didn't need to worry about. He was beginning to get the idea. A knock on the door got his attention and he saw Evelyn Muntab standing in the doorway.

"Sir, do you have a moment?" she asked.

"Sure, have a seat," Harry replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, sir. I'm trying to look a little towards the future. Some of my team will be reaching a point where I'd have to look at reassigning them in a few years. You know, age, that sort of thing. I've noticed that a few of the new recruits could have some real promise for the tactical squad. I wanted to suggest something to you and get your opinion."

"Ok, I'm listening," Harry replied.

“Well, I’m trying to say this without sounding like a brown noser but those who were formerly part of your DA are real standouts among the recruits. Their ability with a wand is superior; they now their defensive charms spot on and they show a lot of poise and self control. I’d like to discuss the possibility of prepping them for movement into the tactical squad when the time comes,” she said.

“Well, first of all, I appreciate your comments and no it didn’t sound like you were brown nosing me, well not much, anyway,” Harry said with a laugh. “I’m glad you’re looking ahead and I think that it’s a great idea. Let me know who you have in mind and I’ll talk to them about it as well.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate your support,” the tactical squad leader said and then rose and left his office.

The discussion reminded Harry of something and he reached into the pocket of his robe and took out the envelope he had been handed during the farewells at Beauxbaton. He had forgotten about it in all the things that happened afterwards and was surprised when he found it when he put on his robe that morning before leaving for work. It was addressed in a compact precise script to M. Potter. He broke the plain wax seal and pulled out the sheet of parchment that it contained. He unfolded the sheet and began to read.

Most Esteemed Monsieur Potter,

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Henri Pelletier and I am entering my seventh year at Beauxbaton Academy of Magic. I was a student in the Defense Against the Dark Arts session that you conducted with Professor LeMond. I remember you saying that you would be happy to have any of us on your team at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the British Ministry of Magic. I am writing to you to ask for any information or guidance that you could offer to me regarding making an application to your office.

I realize that there are opportunities here in France but I am very interested in the methods and the organizational changes you have introduced. Also, the opportunity to learn from you would be of great

value for me. I wish to thank you for reading this message and for all the time that you spent here at Beauxbaton during your recent visits.

Respectfully yours,

Henri Pelletier

Harry sat back in his chair. It seemed the Director was correct about applications. He would have to give some thought to how he worded his reply. He wanted to be encouraging without seeming to make any promises. Maybe Hermione or Ginny could help there, or even Fleur. He folded the letter and tucked it back in his robe.

Later while going through some reports he received a message from the Director to come up to his office. Harry arrived in a few moments and was waved ahead by the secretary. He rapped on the door and when he heard the Director call him in he swung the door open and entered.

"Harry, sit down, please. I trust that all went well last week, you look rested."

"Yes, sir. We had a very good time; mostly it was just a relaxing time for us both. We spent one day at Beauxbaton but it was more of a friendly visit, nothing official," Harry said.

"Good, well, while you were gone we made some final decisions on the ideas for internships and exchanges. I'd like you to take a look at the plan and give us any comments you might have. Basically we are looking to place a few students in strategic spots. We'll put one intern with Ms. Granger to work alongside the assistant we hired for her that just graduated from Hogwarts in June."

"Was she a Gryffindor Prefect?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry, as a matter of fact she was. Do you know her?"

Harry explained the conversation that Hermione had with the then Gryffindor seventh year during one of their trips to meet the Centaurs.

"I've always said that talent attracts talent. There will also be an intern for your Department to use as you choose. I remember your comments and I agree with your idea about using them in non tactical situations. Some of the other departments have also expressed an interest in the idea. We'll announce the plan at the start of term banquet at Hogwarts and we'd like you to be the Ministry spokesperson, Harry."

"I'd be glad to, sir," Harry said.

"Excellent. So how are things going otherwise?"

"Good, sir. Evelyn Muntab wants to start prepping some of the recruits for eventual movement into the tactical squad. We're seeing some results from the cross channel cooperation on that smuggling mess. Maxwell showed me a report from the French that they've arrested several of our 'persons of interest'. I suppose I should have allowed Ms. Westwood a shot at it earlier but I was just too worried about her. Guess I need to be less protective."

"I can't fault you there, Harry. You're charting unknown territory with that young lady. I can understand your caution," the Director said.

"I just have to figure out what I'm going to do with her in the future. She wants to come work for me full time but she doesn't plan on going past her fifth year. I'd really like her to go all the way through but she has some persuasive arguments. I didn't think I'd have to make these kinds of decisions for years yet, when my own kids are teenagers. But I have a little time left; she's just starting her fourth year."

"Always a man ahead of his time, eh?"

"More like always a man trying to play catch up, sir," Harry said with a rueful smile.

Harry's Future, Part 20

Harry sat at the faculty table in the Great Hall at Hogwarts awaiting the arrival of the new batch of first years. Only a few weeks prior he was sitting in nearly the same spot as a newlywed groom looking out over the hundreds of family and friends and other guests who had shared what he considered to be the most magical day in his young life. Today he was here as a representative of the Ministry of Magic to announce the new intern program that would offer this year's sixth year students a chance to gain experience and exposure at the Ministry and get paid for it.

As he looked out over the second through seventh years he recognized the now fourth years that he had taught during his last year including his legal ward, Abigail Westwood, who sat half way up the Ravenclaw table. Her lack of stature was becoming more pronounced as the others in her year were growing taller. But that smallish body housed an enormous talent, the depths of which Harry wondered if they would ever fully understand. But she seemed happy. Her summer was spent largely at the Burrow under the watchful and loving eye of Mrs. Weasley with a lot of help from Fleur.

She must have sensed Harry looking at her because she leaned back a bit and looked up at him, giving him a shy smile and a wave. He replied in kind. He had already shared greetings with the staff and faculty and he was anxious to see the introduction of the new crop of witches and wizards in training.

Professor McGonagall rose from her seat and walked to the podium at the front of the dais. She rapped the gavel lightly to get everyone's attention.

"Welcome back to another year at Hogwarts," she began. "I trust everyone has had a happy and healthy summer break and you return to us ready for another challenging year of learning. In a moment we will invite our first year students to join us and be selected for their houses but first I would like to acknowledge the presence of one of Hogwarts favorite graduates who is here today to announce an exciting new program at the Ministry of Magic that he will discuss with

us after we conclude the feast. I am speaking of course of Mr. Harry Potter.”

The applause was thunderous. He acknowledged this with a broad smile and wave. His wife Ginny and his ‘big sister’ Fleur both tried to impress upon him how important it was to politely acknowledge whatever demonstrations of appreciation or recognition that were offered. His natural tendency to try and downplay such things or show embarrassment only served to hurt peoples’ feelings, they insisted. Harry was beginning to understand that the despised and unwanted child that lived all those years in the Dursleys’ home had evolved into a beloved public figure and justifiably so.

“Yes, yes, if you would settle down please, it is time to welcome our new class of students. Professor Sprout if you would, please.”

The stout Herbology professor and assistant Headmistress led a line of amazed, bemused and in some cases, most likely muggle born, frightened eleven year old boys and girls down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw table to stand before the dais and confront that standard of Hogwarts life, the Sorting Hat. The battered old wizard’s hat sat on its stool waiting to be placed atop the head of each new student to determine to which of the four houses the child would spend his or her next seven years. Harry recalled his encounter with the aged and much repaired hat and how important his first real act as a wizard and Hogwarts student really was.

As tradition dictated before the sorting began the Hat sang a song that it spent the preceding year composing while sitting on a shelf in the Head’s office. It encouraged all the students to work hard so they would be prepared to be part of the ongoing work to make the wizarding world a better place then it had been and to remember that humans were not the only magic users. Harry was surprised at this. Apparently it must have heard about Hermione’s and his efforts. Then it went silent awaiting the first child.

He watched with great interest as each child sat on the stool and Professor Sprout placed the hat on his or her head. Sometimes the hat shouted out a house almost immediately, others took a moment or two. Either way, it was soon over and the new students were

seated at their places at the near end of their respective house tables accompanied by much applause.

“Welcome, first years, well done you. Everyone enjoy your dinner,” Professor McGonagall said.

Harry watched as the food appeared on the tables and the students began to serve themselves. From the looks of the first years he could tell who the muggle borns were. He couldn't help but smile. He spent the meal chatting with the professors on either side of him as well as looking out over the students as they ate. The time passed quickly and soon Professor McGonagall was back at the podium to get everyone's attention.

“Once again, a wonderful welcome back feast. Now, everyone, if you would please join me and show our special guest how much we appreciate his taking time to visit with us this evening,” she said as she turned and gestured to Harry. “Mr. Harry Potter, if you please.”

Harry rose to the sound of tremendous applause and he smiled and gave a wave as he approached the podium. He was, as usual for an appearance at Hogwarts, dressed in his best formal robe and he looked every inch a proper wizard. He shook hands with the Professor as they met at the podium and then she left him to his audience.

“Thank you very much, Professor. Also my thanks to the faculty and students and staff. It is always a pleasure to be here at Hogwarts. It is very much a coming home for me each time I return. I want to offer a special welcome to our new first years. It wasn't all that long ago that I was sitting at the near end of the Gryffindor table, moderately stunned. For those of you who come from nonmagical families I know that this must all be very strange but I want to assure you that you have come to a very special and wonderful place and very much my second home,” Harry said, smiling down at the young faces that were looking up at him.

“However, it is to the more senior students that I've come to speak to tonight. As a representative of the Ministry of Magic I would like to make the following announcement. As a result of an initiative

suggested by the Director of Magical Law Enforcement and embraced by the Minister we are offering the opportunity for sixth year students to become paid interns for a period of twelve months between the end of their sixth year and the start of their seventh. This internship will provide the opportunity for capable witches or wizards to gain experience and help them determine if the Ministry is a place they'd like to pursue a career. Opportunities will be open in all departments to include my own. Of course, such an intern would not be permitted to engage in Patroller or Auror activities but would be able to help on the investigative side, administration and so on. A list of the areas of interest and requirements will be posted in the common room of each house. In general, each position will require certain OWLs as well as the candidate having successfully passed your sixth year exams. You will need two letters of recommendation from faculty members here at the school as well as an endorsement from the Headmistress."

Harry paused and could see a number of muted conversations going on in the sixth year areas of all the tables as well as some not to happy looks from the seventh years. He was prepared for this.

"Now, to the seventh years this may seem a bit unfair and it would be understandable if you were thinking 'hey, how come we didn't get a chance like this'. My answer is to apologize but the idea didn't surface until last fall and my unfortunate run in with a slightly overlarge lizard made a mess of things," he said with a lopsided grin. "However, you should know that the Ministry is still looking for capable and qualified witches and wizards to fill positions that still remain open after the supporters of Tom Riddle were flushed out and those who couldn't get on board with the Minister's reform initiatives left. I will be staying here at Hogwarts overnight and I will be available here in the Great Hall after dinner to discuss these opportunities with any seventh year that wishes to do so. I'll be here at the near end of the Gryffindor table. I'll also be available after breakfast for a little while as well."

Harry looked around at all the students and couldn't help but smile.

"We, all of us, have an opportunity to take advantage of what Tom Riddle inadvertently did for us. He showed us just how corrupt and worthless many of the old notions that he championed really were.

After all of the pain and misery he caused, his fall and that of his followers has given us the chance to rebuild a community that will be far better for all of us. That is my hope and that is what I work for everyday. I hope you will consider joining me in that effort. Thank you and I look forward to talking to you while I'm here."

As Harry stepped away from the podium, the students once more broke into raucous applause. His brother-in-law, Bill, gave him a wink and Hagrid, a thumbs up. Professor McGonagall gaveled for quiet and then dismissed the students. Harry waited until the crush of students exited the Hall and then he set up shop at the end of the Gryffindor table. A number of seventh years had remained behind and Harry was busy for the next several hours discussing opportunities, requirements and working conditions. It appeared that there wouldn't be a lack of applicants come spring.

As the tail end of summer faded into the beginning of autumn Harry's life took on a routine that he was thoroughly enjoying. Ginny had abandoned her boarding house room in Holyhead and had taken up permanent residence in the Black house with Harry. He was taking twice weekly trips to St. Mungo's for physical therapy and his knee was making significant improvement. A third visit was made every other week where he had an ongoing conversation with Dr. Parsons. While he never imagined he would ever be free of the concerns that the healer believed were at the root of his 'anger issues' he did have some hope that he would be able to deal with them in a more controlled manner. He was also starting to come to the realization that his fears of being alone again had very shallow roots. He need only look at the photograph that Ginny provided to confirm this.

Two important events took place in October that demonstrated the inevitabilities of life. The first was when during one of the Weasley Saturday gatherings Bill and Fleur announced they were expecting their first child at the end of April or beginning of May of the following year. Mrs. Weasley's reaction was very similar to the one she had when Harry and Ginny told her they were engaged. There were loud shouts of joy and tears and hugging and general joyous chaos. No

one had suspected since Fleur had been wearing slightly looser clothes to hide the barely perceptible changes to her slender frame

It was later that month when the other end of the progression of nature intruded heavily on their family. Harry and Ginny were sitting in his study after dinner talking about nothing much in particular when Kreacher knocked on the door. He had a parchment roll in his hand.

"Master Harry, this message has just arrived from Hogwarts," the little elf said.

"Thank you, Kreacher," Harry replied.

He took the message and unrolled it and began to read. As he did so, his expression became increasingly somber.

"What is it, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Abigail's grandmother passed away last night," he replied.

"Oh, no. That poor child," Ginny said.

Harry took a deep breath.

"Well, it's not unexpected. We knew she was getting weaker all the time. It says that all the funeral arrangements have already been made. It will be this Saturday at the church she belonged to. I need to go up to Hogwarts for a bit, love. I'll be back in a while."

"Do you want me to go along?" Ginny asked.

"You need to leave early tomorrow and I don't want you tired from all the traveling. I can handle this, it's what I signed up for after all," he said with a grim little smile.

Ginny just nodded.

It was close to midnight when Harry returned. Ginny was asleep and Harry carefully eased into bed beside her. It took some time for him to

fall asleep. He woke up when he felt Ginny getting up to start her trip back to Holyhead.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to wake you. How did it go last night?"

"It wasn't good, but it could have been a lot worse. Abigail knew it was coming. She's been 'watching' her grandmother for a while and she knew she didn't have long. She feels like a tie has been cut. Her grandfather is still alive but since he doesn't recognize anyone anymore it doesn't help much. She's hurting but it's amazing how much support she's getting from her mates up there. The Ravenclaws are really rallying around her."

"Well, Harry, I'm sure they look at her much the way Gryffindors look at you," Ginny said as she was dressing.

"What do you mean, love?"

Ginny turned to look at her husband, minus his glasses, his messy hair in total disarray. She was giving him one of 'those' looks.

"Harry, Gryffindors past and present take a lot of pride in the fact that you are one of ours. Considering what Abigail has done and will likely do in the future, she gives the Ravenclaws the same kind of pride. Not to mention that fact that she's so loveable. So are plans set for Saturday?"

"Yes, I'll go up Friday afternoon and we'll take the floo network back to the Burrow. We'll go to the funeral from there. The message from Mrs. William's minister indicated it would be a graveside service in the church's cemetery. The message indicated they aren't expecting much of turn out," Harry said grimly.

"How sad. Well, we'll be there," Ginny said.

Harry just nodded.

The Saturday of the funeral for Mrs. Williams was typical for mid autumn. A chill breeze was blowing and the sky was overcast with high thin clouds that allowed little warming from the sun. The small

churchyard cemetery was neat but bleak. The weathered grave stones and bare trees gave it an appropriately somber air. The casket for Mrs. Williams rested above the grave adorned with only a single wreath of flowers. A few chairs were arranged along one side and most were occupied by elderly members of the congregation. The minister stood to one side awaiting the arrival of Abigail and her guardians. A low murmur of voices and footsteps attracted the cleric's attention and she looked up, surprise clear on her face. She did indeed see Abigail, looking somber in black, her long dark hair pulled back away from her pale face. She was flanked by a man and woman, he of medium height with unruly black hair and round glasses, she shorter with a mane of crimson hair. What surprised the minister was the number of people following behind. Directly behind Abigail was an older couple walking arm in arm. Following along was a tall man with red hair with a number of scars on his face walking beside a stunning blonde.

The closer the party approached the more redheads came into view, four in fact, of varying heights but clearly related, each with a woman on his arm. Behind them came a very stern faced older woman walking beside what had to be the smallest man the cleric had ever seen. Trailing behind these two was a somewhat disordered group of younger people, all wearing identical school colors. The minister knew that the granddaughter attended a boarding school to the north and these must be some of her school mates. The minister allowed herself a small smile.

The minister indicated that Abigail should take a seat. Harry and Ginny sat beside her with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley taking the chairs to Ginny's side. Fleur and Bill came to stand directly behind the small girl. Fleur rested a hand on Abigail's shoulder who in turn reached up to place her hand on top. Her other hand was held firmly by Ginny. The others fanned out behind the chairs. The minister took them all in with a slow glance and then said,

"I would like to welcome you all here today as we bid farewell to our dear sister, Cassandra Williams."

At the sound of Abigail's grandmother's first name, a number of heads came up. Harry was aware since he had seen the family tree

that Milligan had prepared but he had not shared that information widely.

“Mrs. Williams had her share of struggles, as have we all, but she always faced them with determination and fortitude. The last years were difficult ones but she was always so proud of her only granddaughter and as her health failed her these last years she often shared with me her worries about her granddaughter. But then Abigail found a guardian angel. In fact, it would appear that she found an entire family of angels and with that knowledge, Cassandra spent her last days at peace. So now, if you’ll join me we will offer our final farewells.”

With that the minister began the formal funeral service. Throughout, Abigail maintained her grip on both Fleur and Ginny. The service concluded and the minister invited Abigail to approach the casket, with Harry escorting, and place a single flower next to the wreath. Harry shook hands with the minister, thanking her for her efforts and then stood with Abigail as the few elderly congregation members came up to bid their friend a last good bye and then took their leave of Abigail. After the small group and the minister walked away out of hearing range Harry turned to face the rest.

“On behalf of Abigail I wanted to thank you for coming here to show your support. As you can imagine it’s been a tough time for her this last year and a half or so but with all of you being there for her, I think it’s safe to say she’ll come through in fine shape. I’d also like to say that in a real way we are saying good bye to one of our own. For those of you who weren’t aware, Mrs. Williams was the great granddaughter of Cassandra Trelawney. So while she may not have possessed any magical abilities of her own she was in a way a conduit for talents that are one of the reasons that Abigail is as special as she is,” he said, looking down at his ward, who was looking back up at him with a sad smile.

“I’d ask that you all come up and take a moment to wish our sister farewell and perhaps leave some token of our respect.”

Harry turned and with a few murmured words, a large bouquet of lilies appeared on top of the casket. Ginny was next and with a brief

motion of her wand that she kept close to her added a dozen roses, so dark red as to be almost black. The Weasley family approached in line and with each more wreaths, bouquets or small blankets of flowers and greenery were added. By the time the last students passed by, the casket was nearly blocked from view. Harry added a parchment envelope addressed to the minister and then led Abigail out of the cemetery.

The congregation was abuzz for weeks after the funeral. No one had expected that so many people would attend and it was generally concluded that Abigail was extremely fortunate to have found such folks to take care of her. The mass and diversity of flowers that were left was also something that everyone found amazing, as those that had attended from the church couldn't recall having seen anyone carrying them when they arrived. They thought the message from Abigail's guardian, Mr. Potter, to have been very warm and generous as he invited the minister to feel free to distribute the flowers amongst the other graves sites. Much to everyone's surprise the flowers retained their color for weeks afterwards. Lastly, the very generous donation that had been left in the envelope suggested that little Abigail would want for nothing in her life from this time onward.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, along with the contingent of Ravenclaws returned to Hogwarts after taking their leave of Abigail. She, with all the other members of the Weasley clan, returned to the Burrow. They did what they could to comfort her with most of the task falling, willingly, on Fleur who spent the majority of the afternoon on one of the couches with Abigail wrapped in the circle of her arms. At various times she was flanked by Ginny or Angelina and on one occasion by Eleanor who whispered a few words to Abigail that got a smile in return. Harry pondered how easily Eleanor and Audrey and Abigail herself had melded into the Weasley family, much as he had done some years earlier. Perhaps this was a magic in and of itself, every bit as profound, if not more, as any conjuration or potion.

Abigail was returned to Hogwarts Sunday evening and although she was somber at the loss of her grandmother she was buoyed by the knowledge that pretty much everywhere she turned there was someone that she could talk to or lean on. Harry left her in the

company of a number of Ravenclaws and he felt confident that there would be no repeat of last year's turmoil.

Harry continued his efforts at the Ministry dividing his time between day to day enforcement issues, Patroller training and the cooperative agreement with the French Ministry of Magic. In conjunction with this last effort was the work of getting to the bottom of the criminal conspiracy that was behind the contraband smuggling operation. A number of leads were panning out but they so far had not been able to indentify who the leader was and what was the ultimate aim of the group. Hermione had taken up most of the effort with the other magical races, now that proposals had been received from the Centaurs and as well as the Goblins. The prevailing wisdom was that as far as the house elves were concerned, the Ministry would have to move forward with their best interests in mind but with no real input from that segment of the magical community. Harry was confident that they would be well served by Hermione.

By now it was late November and Harry was sitting at his desk looking over some documents that Hermione had dropped off asking for his comments. Sounds in the hallway outside attracted his attention and he stood up and went to the door to see what all the noise was about. He saw Maxwell hurrying towards him.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"We have a situation, sir. Muntab took her team to raid a house that's on that farm where the smugglers' warehouse is located. They had information one of our suspects was holed up there. It was a set up. The house is full of wizards and our people are pinned down."

"Pinned down? Why don't they Disapparate out of there?"

"We have two wizards down and they are in the open. We can't get to them without exposing someone. They are keeping them covered but it's a mess. I'm sending every available man," the deputy chief said.

"Fine, lets go," Harry said moving towards the lobby.

“Sir, um...” Maxwell began.

“Forget about that. We have people in trouble. All bets are off. Let’s move,” Harry said as he continued to the lobby. He saw the rest of the Aurors gathered in the lobby.

“Alright, settle down. We have people in trouble but I don’t want to add to that. We will Disapparate to the front of the old warehouse where we took down the smugglers and then proceed to the house in question. Who came back to make the report?” Harry asked.

“I did, sir.”

“Ok, Dolby, you’ll lead us in once we get there. Let’s move,” Harry said and then he Disapparated.

The Aurors began popping into view and once they were all assembled, Dolby took the lead with Harry close behind. They could hear shouts and the sound of spells being thrown. The group of reinforcements ran at a crouch through low brush until they came to the edge of the overgrowth. About fifty yards away was a substantial stone house of two stories that had been abandoned for some years but was certainly occupied now. At all the window openings were wizards firing curses at Aurors who were crouched behind trees, a broken down rock wall and whatever else they could find for cover. The rock wall had taken some recent heavy damage. Out on the bare open lawn were two huddled masses of robes that were obviously the downed Aurors.

It was obvious that some sort of enchantment had been put on the house because spells were striking but not doing any damage. It looked as if the house had been magically armor plated.

“Alright, spread out on either side of me but keep down. I’m going to given them a count of five to surrender. If I say six we fire ‘Confringo’ at them all at once. Give it everything you’ve got.”

Harry took out his wand and touched his throat and said ‘Sonorous’.

“You in the house, this is Chief Potter of the Office of Magical Law Enforcement,” Harry’s voice boomed out over the yard, the spell making it impossible to determine the location of the speaker. “You have until the count of five to throw out your wands and stand in clear view with your hands on top of your heads. You won’t get a second chance,” Harry said then paused a moment before he began the countdown. “One, two, three, four, five,” he paused before saying six but since there was no sign of surrender he shouted “six.” As one Harry and the other Aurors pointed their wands at the house and shouted “Confringo”.

The combined spells, dramatically boosted by Harry’s battering ram, struck the front of the reinforced stone structure like a run-away freight train. The house remained intact at the moment of impact but all could see that it shuddered as it slid backwards about a foot. The shift ripped the house off its foundation and without support the interior walls and floors began to fail while the magicked exterior remained intact.

Two renegade wizards dove out one of the lower floor windows and were immediately stupefied but no one else emerged as the interior of the building collapsed into the basement. The roof sagged and the middle section fell in as the ridge beam snapped. Dust blew out of the windows as the rumble of destruction rolled away to be replaced by a deathly quiet. Harry took a deep breath and looked at Maxwell and said,

“Get someone to St. Mungo’s and get the medics out here. The rest of you come with me and let’s see what we have here.”

As one Auror popped out of view, Harry and the rest emerged from the overgrowth and began walking towards the ruined building. Members of the original strike team began to emerge from various places of cover and several hurried over to their fallen comrades. Harry was shocked and dismayed when he noticed one of those emerging from cover was a lanky red head supporting one arm with the other hand. He moved toward the two downed Aurors and their leader, Evelyn Muntab, who was standing between them. She looked at Harry as he approached.

"Whitby is gone, Anderson is alive but in bad shape," she said.

"Help is one the way. What happened here?" Harry asked, his voice even.

"We got a tip that one of the suspects we were looking for was holed up here. The house had been checked when we were first here with the smugglers but there was nothing to keep anyone from moving in after we were done. It was a setup. We had all the exits covered and we started towards the front door when we got hit from everywhere."

"What's he doing here?" Harry asked, very quietly, gesturing to Ron who was standing nearby.

"I thought this was going to be routine and I wanted to get some of the recruits I was considering for movement into the Tactical squad some field experience. He knocked me out of the way of a curse I didn't see coming. He must have hurt himself when we hit the ground," she said while trying not to back away from Harry's glare.

"Get this mess cleaned up and I'll talk to you in my office tomorrow morning at nine."

"Yes, sir."

Harry walked over to Ron.

"You alright?" Harry asked

"If you call a broken arm alright, yeah, I guess so," Ron said obviously in pain.

"Hang in there. It looks like the folks from St. Mungo's are here. You did a good job. Just like the old days," Harry said with a crooked smile.

"Yes, sir," Ron said, smiling a bit in reply.

Several healers hurried across the sparse lawn to the sides of the downed Aurors and then one came over to see to Ron. The healer moved her wand over Ron's forearm. He could feel a tingling.

"A simple break, young fellow. I've knitted the bone together but it may be sore for a day or so. On the outside chance it continues to bother you, come see us. Good day to you."

"Thank you, ma'am," Ron said as he flexed his hand and moved his arm around.

Harry gave Ron a companionly swat on the other shoulder and then moved to examine the destroyed house. The hollow stone shell sat unevenly on the foundation leaving a gap through which he could see the wood and stone debris from the ruined interior walls and floors. He could also see the lower half of a wizard sticking out from the pile. Some of them may have Disapparated out but he wondered if they had spelled the house against Disapparation to prevent a direct attack from inside. He sighed and turned around looking for Maxwell. He saw him talking to Muntab although they were both looking in his direction. He pointed at his deputy and waved him over. When Maxwell walked up Harry said,

"I don't know who you get to do it but we have to clear this debris and get the bodies out, then find a way to drop the rest of the house so it looks like it just collapsed from age. I'm going to have a talk with Muntab in the morning. I'm leaving you in charge here until it's cleaned up but I want you there in the morning for the meeting. You can come back up when we are done. Any questions?" Harry said.

"No, sir, I understand," Maxwell replied.

"Good."

Harry walked back toward where Ron was standing. He quietly said,

"You better let Mum know you're alright. It won't be long before word gets up to Dad and then you know what's going to happen. Stop by and see me tomorrow in the afternoon."

“Ok, chief,” Ron said with small smile.

Harry moved away and when he was clear of all that was happening he Disapparated back to the lobby and before anyone could ask any questions he made his way to the Director’s office. The secretary looked up as he approached.

“There you are, Mr. Potter. The Director and Minister were both looking for you. You should go right up to the Minister’s office.”

“Thank you.”

Harry turned and made his way up to the Minister’s office. The secretary waved him in.

“Harry. What in the world happened?” the Minister asked.

“The Tactical Squad was set up and ambushed. We lost one and another is in pretty bad shape. I’m not sure but I think we got all of them,” Harry said and then proceeded to give his two bosses the full details.

When he was done the other two wizards looked grim. The implications were serious. It appeared that whatever organization was behind the smuggling operation was more dangerous then they first thought and was ready to take drastic action. It also appeared that Harry had some issues within his department to deal with. The three spent the rest of the day discussing the issues.

At nine o’clock the following morning four people were wedged into Harry’s office. He was in his usual seat behind his desk. Maxwell, Milligan and Muntab were wedged in side by side across from him. Harry was regarding them intently. He leaned forward to rest his arms on his desk.

“We really screwed up yesterday and as a result we lost one, possibly two, experienced wizards. We also lost a number of leads and instead have a bunch of dead bodies that may or may not tell us anything.”

"I'm sorry, sir. I take full responsibility for what happened yesterday," Muntab said.

"I appreciate that, Evelyn, but the fact is we all have to share the blame on this one, me most of all. When I was assigned to this job one of the big things I was supposed to do was centralize all the law enforcement activities so that we all knew what was going on and shared information and so forth. But apparently I didn't pay attention to what was going on internally with the Aurors. So, from now on this is how it goes. No one goes off on any independent missions. All tactical operations have to be reviewed and approved by Maxwell as Deputy Chief. Any tips, rumors or whatever have to be vetted through Milligan and his MIU group. And anything to do with this smuggling gang has to be brought to my attention. We've learned a lesson the hard way here, let's not forget it."

"Yes, sir," they all responded.

"Now to the second issue. What were inexperienced people doing up there?"

"I misjudged the situation, sir. As I told you yesterday I thought it was a routine mission to capture a single individual. I thought I'd use a couple of the more promising patrollers to cover possible exit routes. I got it wrong," Muntab said.

"Well, you certainly jumped the gun to say the least. Fortunately we only had the one injury and that's been taken care of. I still want to pursue this idea but it has to be handled properly. Give me the names of the ones you're interested in and I'll talk to them one on one. Then we'll establish a training plan. I don't think this is something we want to do on the job. And absolutely no tagging along on missions, no matter how simple they might seem. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," Muntab replied.

"Ok. Now, how are we doing at the farm house?" Harry asked.

"We were able to undo the enchantment on the building's exterior," Maxwell started. "With a little persuasion we were able to get the

remaining walls to fall outward and now we're working our way down through the debris pile. I'm going back up after we're done here and I'll send word back on what we've found so far."

"Good." Harry replied and then looked to Milligan. "You have your people up there yet?"

"Yes, sir. Four of mine are there to sift through whatever comes out of the debris."

"Ok. Let's get back to work then," Harry said.

He watched as the three left the office. He hoped that future lessons would not be so costly to learn. He also needed to get a message to Minister LeClerq and inquire if anything they've discovered might shed light on this latest episode. It was around one o'clock when he heard a knock on the doorframe and he looked up to see Ron standing in the doorway.

"Come on in, Ron. Close the door," Harry said.

Ron did so and sat looking across at his best mate.

"So, how's the arm?" Harry asked.

"It was sore last night, but when I woke up this morning it was fine. Mum was all over me about it but I was finally able to convince her. She was none too happy last night, I can tell you that," Ron said with a grin.

"I can imagine. The first reason I wanted to see you this afternoon was to repeat what I said yesterday. You did a good job up there. We've both had a lot of practice getting in and out of tough spots. I'm glad to see your time as a business tycoon in the making didn't dull your reflexes," Harry said.

"No way, mate. Being around George and all those dangerous gags kept me on my toes day and night. This job has been a lot more relaxing, yesterday excluded of course," Ron said with a laugh.

"I'm glad to hear that. I don't know what Muntab told you but the reason you were there is you've been identified as a Patroller with serious potential to move up to Auror ranks. In fact, she wants you to be part of the Tactical Squad eventually. She's got her eye on just about all the former DA members. I'm going to talk with each individually but after yesterday I figured I'd start with you first. Are you interested?"

"To right I'm interested. That's one of the reasons I joined the Patrollers. I hoped it would be a way into the Aurors without having to get all my NEWTs," Ron said excitedly.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're so excited but don't think it'll be that much easier. We have to put together a training plan to get you and any others from Patroller to Auror and anyone that doesn't have NEWTs will have to be able to demonstrate equivalent ability. It'll be tough going, I can guarantee that," Harry said seriously. "Probably even tougher since you were all associated with me in one way or another."

"No worries, Harry. You trained us really well. I think we'll do just fine," Ron said.

"Thanks. Well, that's all I had for you right now. After I talk to the others you'll all be hearing about what we have in mind. I guess if not beforehand, I'll see you Saturday at the Burrow, right?"

"Sure thing, boss," Ron said as he stood up and made for the door.

Harry smiled a little as he watched Ron move away from the door. He pulled out a sheet of parchment and began writing a message to M. LeClerq. He wondered where this would all lead and what sort of spider lay at the center of the web they were trying to unravel. He laughed to himself when he thought he better not use that analogy if he mentioned this to Ron.

Harry's Future, Part 21

In the weeks left before Christmas, Harry had conducted his one-on-one interviews with the former DA members. It was an interesting experience for him since his only official interactions with his former classmates had been with Ron and the one brief meeting with Alicia Spinnet. He didn't consider the wedding reception official. All were enthusiastic about having been earmarked for possible movement into the Aurors although Anthony Goldstein had indicated he would be more interested in the Magical Investigative Unit as opposed to the Tactical Squad.

Harry's interview with Parvati Patil was a bit uncomfortable for Harry until he broached a topic that had bothered him every once in a while over the years. He sat behind his desk looking at the young woman who had been his date to the TriWizard Tournament Ball all those years ago. She was quite excited about the opportunity to move up. Near the end of the discussion Harry looked at her with a slight half grin.

"You know, Parvati, I don't know if I ever said it to you or not, but if I didn't I will now. I'm sorry for my ridiculous behavior at the TriWizard Tournament Ball. I treated you really badly that night and you didn't deserve that."

She looked startled but recovered quickly.

"It's really nice that you thought to say that, um, Harry..sir."

"Harry's fine at the moment."

"I'll admit that I was kind of upset that night. All the girls thought that it was so great that I was going to the Ball with you. A few days later Ginny explained it all to me though. She said with all the stuff going on that you had to deal with you were, well, I guess confused was the best way to put it," Parvati said with a smile. "But thanks for being concerned."

Harry just smiled and nodded and then they finished with the business at hand. He also had to work out sending some of Milligan's

people to Paris to confer with the French investigators on what they had been uncovering. The more they uncovered about the conspiracy the more there seemed to be going on. It nagged at Harry that perhaps Voldemort and his Death Eaters were just a local element of something much bigger and more dangerous. He intended to have Milligan broach the idea of contacting the Albanian magical community to try and get some idea of what might have gone on while Voldemort was in hiding there.

In between all this, Harry, now with Ginny's help, had been working on his Christmas list. After his first Christmas of giving what some would consider elaborate gifts Harry was now concentrating on things that had a more personal touch, trying to match something to each of his family that had special meaning or application in their lives. He hadn't been able to do any gift giving last year as he was just beginning his recovery from the clash with the dragon. So as the special day approached he was looking forward to the barely controlled mayhem that was the Burrow during a holiday.

His first holiday task was to collect Abigail from the Hogwarts Express for the break. He was standing on the platform waiting for her to get off the train. Ginny was in Holyhead for the last match before the holiday season. Soon a familiar, if diminutive, figure appeared in the doorway of the train carriage and her face lit up in a smile as she saw Harry waiting for her. She used her small size to advantage, darting and ducking among the many students and parents on the platform to make her way to Harry. She threw herself into Harry's arms.

"Welcome home, little one."

"It's great to be home, Harry. Are we staying at your house tonight or are we going right to the Burrow?" she asked excitedly in her airy voice.

"First of all, it's 'our' house now, Abigail and second, we are stopping at the house and then we're taking the floo network to the Burrow. We'll be staying there until after Christmas. What's all this?" he asked as he looked down at the canvas carry bag that Abigail had slung over one shoulder.

“Christmas presents, Harry, so no peeking, ok?”

Harry held up both his hands palms outward.

“Never, little one. I love looking forward to surprises on Christmas day. Do you need help carrying them though?”

“Nope,” she said and grabbing Harry’s hand she began pulling him to the wall that divided the magical from the mundane.

In moments they were curbside preparing to enter the Ministry sedan that would take them to the London house. Harry had made arrangements for the ride after having had a talk with Director Grimsson. Harry had been having some concerns about abusing the perk of relying on the Ministry transportation department but his boss assured him that he was more than welcome to the use of the cars on occasions such as this.

As usual the trip was short and uneventful. Kreacher bowed them into the house as soon as they made it to the top of the front porch.

“Is Kreacher coming too, Harry?”

“No, little one. He’ll asked if I minded if he went up to Hogwarts to visit his friends. I thought that would be a great idea. He said he knew that the Weasleys would take good care of us while he was away.”

“Oh, wow, that’s great. Let me just drop a couple of things in my room and I’ll be right back.”

Harry smiled at how easily she referred to it as her room and watched as she dashed up the first flight of stairs. Harry made his way to the study where he collected several bags of his own to take to the Burrow. Ginny was to arrive later that evening. By the time he was standing by the well cleaned fireplace in the parlor he could hear Abigail hastening down the stairs from the second floor. She came into the parlor with her bag of gifts and big smile.

“All ready when you are, Harry,” she said.

“Right,” Harry replied and then called out. “We’re leaving, Kreacher. Enjoy your time at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, Master Harry.”

Harry looked down at Abigail and said,

“Off you go, little one.”

“Right,” she replied then took a handful of floo powder and threw it into the fireplace.

Then she said ‘the Burrow’ and stepped into the green flames. Harry smiled as he could just barely hear the little squeal that always marked a trip by Abigail on the floo network. Harry waited for a few moments and then followed. When he stepped from the fireplace at the Burrow he saw Abigail engulfed in a Molly Weasley hug.

“Oh, Abigail, I’ve missed you so much. How are you, my dear?”

“I’m doing great, Mrs. Weasley,” came the muffled reply.

Mrs. Weasley gave a laugh and released her hold on the girl and gestured for Harry to step forward to get his welcome.

“Harry, dear, so wonderful to see you, too. Come into the kitchen the both of you. I have a little something to hold you over until dinner.”

‘A little something’ turned out to be a platter of biscuits and crackers combined with slices of cheese and meats. A pitcher of pumpkin juice and a pot of tea were also provided. Harry and Abigail took places at the table across from Mrs. Weasley.

“It will just be us and your father for dinner, Harry. The rest will be coming at various times tomorrow but we should all be here for Christmas eve,” Molly Weasley said.

“I’m really looking forward to it, what with last year's holiday ruined,” he replied quietly.

“Speaking of that, how’s the leg, my dear?”

“It’s been pretty good lately. I haven’t had much reason to put any stress on it and I’ve been keeping up with the therapy so it’s greatly improved. I haven’t had to use the cane in weeks,” he said with a smile.

“That’s wonderful. And what about you, Abigail? How have you been getting along?”

“I’m doing ok, Mrs. Weasley. I was kind of sad for a while but everyone has been so good to me at school and Ginny and Hermione sent me lots of notes so it’s ok,” Abigail replied.

Mrs. Weasley just smiled back and poured Abigail some juice. After some more small talk and snacking Mrs. Weasley made the announcement it was time to get things ready for dinner so the three went to work, Harry setting the table while Abigail resumed her role as cook’s chief assistant. It was well after sundown when Arthur Weasley came through the kitchen door.

“Hello, everyone. Harry, Abigail, it’s wonderful to see you,” he said by way of greeting.

Abigail hurried over and hugged Mr. Weasley and then said,

“Hello, sir, how are you? How’s the car coming along?”

“Well, Abigail, I’m doing fine but the car is coming along slowly since I lost my helper,” he said kindly, looking down at her.

“Maybe I can help you with it while I’m here, sir,” she replied.

“Ah, just a moment you two. There will be no rust or grease in this house this holiday. You can go play in the shop the day after Christmas.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Harry did his best to keep a straight face. Dinner was a pleasant affair with just the four of them clustered at one end of the long table. As much as Harry enjoyed having the whole clan around there was something to be said for a small group. It was an unspoken agreement not to discuss work so most of the conversation revolved around Abigail at Hogwarts, the Popular, and the various events in the lives of the Weasley extended family. Of particular interest was the growing relationship between Charlie and Eleanor MacManus. Mrs. Weasley was particularly pleased.

“You wouldn’t have known, Harry, since Charlie graduated before you started at Hogwarts but he always had girls hanging around him but once he got involved in his dragon research it was all he thought about. And Eleanor seems like such a nice young lady.”

“Well, Ginny was telling me a few things. She and Eleanor became friends partly because soon after she started with the Harpies, Eleanor would strike up casual conversations about Charlie. Apparently she was two years behind him and she was a chaser for Hufflepuff. Had quite a crush on him, too,” Harry said with a grin. “Ginny said a group of them were sitting around once and the other Harpies couldn’t understand how the two best seekers to come out of Hogwarts in a century, they said, didn’t go pro. They couldn’t figure out if Charlie and I should be admired as idealists or pitied for not having a clue,” he finished with a laugh.

“Well, I think you both made the right choices,” Abigail said seriously. “Although Charlie really is a great flyer. We had fun over the summer the couple of times he came by and we flew together. Your dad was really good, too, wasn’t he, Harry?”

“So I’m told, little one. He flew seeker for Gryffindor when they won the house cup a few times and a lot of people said he was very good.”

“They were right, Harry,” Arthur Weasley interjected. “Molly and I were both out of school by the time your father started but I had gone

back to see a few matches when he played and he was an excellent seeker. Not quite in your league, son, but still well above the pack.”

Harry just smiled and nodded. They were just beginning dessert when a pop in the yard announced another arrival. In a moment Ginny came through the door.

“Oh, it feels good to be in a warm kitchen. I thought I was going to freeze out there today,” she said by way of introduction. “We played the Pride of Portree and that’s about as far north as I want to go to play. I’m just glad we started before noon.”

By this time both Harry and Abigail had stood up and the two of them wrapped Ginny in big hugs both as welcome and an attempt to help her warm up.

“Oh, thank you, you two. That feels so good,” she said then kissing Abigail on the top of her head and then Harry on the lips.

“Come on, Ginny. Sit yourself down and have a cup of tea, that’ll help warm you up even more.”

“Thanks, mum,” she said as she dumped her coat and bag on the floor and moved to sit next to Harry.

Harry put his arm around her shoulder as her mother prepared the first cup. Ginny took her first sip and sat back and leaned into her husband.

“Ah, now that’s the just what I needed. Thanks, Mum. Is there anything left to eat? I’m kind of hungry.”

“Of course, dear. Just a moment.”

“So how was the game, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“We won but only just. They had us on points scored but we got the snitch in time. Their first line seeker cracked up and the reserve just wasn’t up to it. That’s something I’ve noticed Harry. The seekers

aren't very deep out there right now. You and Charlie could both make big money if you wanted to," she said with a smile.

"Funny you should mention that, but we were just talking about seekers, my dad included."

"Yes, my dear," Mrs. Weasley said from over by the stove. "Harry was explaining about how Eleanor used to talk to you about Charlie."

Ginny giggled as she held the tea cup in her hands.

"Oh, yeah. She really had a crush on Charlie when she was up at Hogwarts. After we became friends I offered to introduce her to him any number of times but she couldn't bring herself to do it. That was one of the reasons I asked her to be in my wedding party. She practically floats when she walks now, she's so happy to be dating him."

"Well, I must say Charlie seems to be pretty happy these days himself. Finally there's something that can occupy his mind as much as dragons do. Oh, Harry, I'm sorry, dear."

"Mum, it's ok to mention dragons around me, I won't get hysterical," Harry said with a laugh. "Just don't ask me to talk about what happened."

So the five of them sat at the table while Ginny worked her way through her dinner and then after the table was cleared they retired to the living room, with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sharing the love seat and Harry, Ginny and Abigail on the larger couch across from them. The fire was roaring now that the guests had arrived and it was warm and comfortable.

"So my dears, I expect Bill and Fleur, Charlie and Eleanor and Ron for breakfast. Hermione will be here Christmas day and I believe Percy and Audrey will be here after dinner on Christmas eve. George and Angelina will be here in time for dinner tomorrow. It should be a wonderful holiday."

The others thought so as well and the evening past pleasantly. Abigail was the first to show signs of needing to get to bed so Mrs. Weasley suggested they all get some sleep since the next couple of days would be busy indeed. In short order they were all in their rooms and Ginny was snuggled up against Harry under the covers.

"Hmmm, this feels so nice. It was so cold up there today. About fifteen minutes after we finished the game a storm blew in. It was almost as bad as that day you crashed into the tower."

"That was a bad day for sure. I wonder if we're a little crazy playing this game the way we do," Harry said.

"Maybe not just a little," she replied with a laugh as she snuggled in closer. "A little tighter there, sweetheart. I can still feel a bit of a chill."

Harry tightened his grip and tried to imagine he was just a little annoyed about something. Ginny could immediately feel a little bit more body heat.

"Hmm, that's better, Harry, thank you. Of course I can think of something else that would help warm us up," she said as she tilted her head up and began a kiss with Harry that lasted well past midnight.

Harry awoke in a tangle of covers with his wife pressed up against his side. Someone was banging on the bedroom door.

"Harry, Ginny. Time to wake up. Breakfast is almost ready."

"Okay, Abigail. We'll be down shortly," Harry said as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"Ginny, wake up, love. Mum is calling us down to breakfast."

"Hmmm, ok, Harry. I'm awake," she said as she stretched and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

She looked over at him, seeing the tussled hair and slight squint and said,

“Good morning, sweetheart,” and leaned in to kiss him lightly. “I don’t think we have time for showers but we’ll clean up and throw something on and then after we eat we can make ourselves look presentable.”

“Sounds good. I’m starving,” Harry replied.

It was about ten minutes later that they walked hand in hand down the steps and into the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was busy setting out platters on the table which had already been set. Ron was already sitting at the table as were Charlie and Eleanor. Mrs. Weasley looked up and smiled.

“Good morning, my dears. Sit yourselves down and tuck in, I expect Bill and Fluer will be along any moment. Your father will be back shortly.”

Harry and Ginny took seats across from Charlie and Eleanor and Ron. Eleanor looked at Ginny and said,

“So how long did it take you to get warm again?”

“Oh, wasn’t that the worst? We had the fire going last night in the living room and that helped but I had some help later on that got me nice and toasty again,” Ginny said with an arch grin that had Harry turning bright red.

Ron started to laugh as did Charlie until Eleanor said in a low voice,

“That’s funny, so did I.”

At which point it was Charlie’s turn to start blushing. Abigail approached with the last platter hovering in front of her and everyone at the table got quiet and tried to look innocent. As she set the platter down she looked at them and said in her quiet way but with a smirk.

“Like I don’t already know.”

This sent everyone into hysterics and they all got a 'look' from Mrs. Weasley but before she could say anything a silver blonde whirlwind came through the kitchen door.

"FLEUR!" Abigail shouted as best she could and ran to meet her.

"Ah, good morneeng to you, mon speciale'. How are you, Abigail?"

"I'm doing great, Fleur. How are you, both of you?" Abigail asked.

Fleur laughed and putting one hand on her swollen stomach said,

"We are both doing just fine, thank you," she said with a wide smile.

Mrs. Weasley had hurried over and hugged her daughter-in-law and then escorted her towards the table. Fleur approached Ron first and gave him her customary hug from behind and kisses and the others tried to hide their laughs as Ron went bright red. Charlie and Eleanor each received kisses on the cheek as did Ginny. Harry knew better and stood up and waited for Fleur to turn her attention on him. She opened her arms and Harry did likewise and he got the kisses on each cheek and the forehead. He gave Fleur his usual kisses on the cheek but conscious of her pregnant state went easy on the hug.

"Harry, do not stint. I am pregnant not porcelain, I weell not break," Fleur admonished him.

With a smile Harry tightened his grip and Fleur said,

"Ah, much better, mon frère, much better."

"Muum, Bill ees outside weeth Dad bringing up the Christmas tree."

"Thank you, dear. There will be plenty for them when they get here. Now, everyone tuck in."

Platters were passed and food heaped on plates. Harry was bracketed by Ginny on one side and Abigail on the other with Fleur on Abigail's other side. Harry was busy digging into his plate of eggs, sausages and bacon and didn't notice the look he was getting from

Eleanor but Ginny did and she gave her friend a questioning glance. Eleanor just smiled a little and shook her head as if to say it was nothing. Shortly after, Bill and his father could be heard coming through the front door that opened into the living room with the big tree that they had taken down and floated to the house. They positioned it at the far end of the living room where the remodelers had created a high cathedral ceiling.

“Oh, Arthur, it’s beautiful. Where ever did you find it?” Molly enthused.

“I’ve been hunting for it for weeks, Molly. With last years Christmas being what it was I wanted something special.”

Harry looked down at his plate with a bit of discomfort and Ginny threw her arm around his shoulder and planted a kiss on his cheek. Her look told him that no such thoughts were permitted. He smiled back. He then looked over at Ron.

“Is the board handy, Ron?”

“Of course, mate. We’ll set it up right after breakfast.”

Harry smiled and resumed his assault on his breakfast. The senior Weasley males joined the rest as did Molly and it was a grand time for all. Clean up was quick and efficient and in next to no time Harry and Ron were concentrating across the table on their first game. Abigail had gone with Mr. Weasley to check on the Popular but only to look, as they were reminded forcefully. Charlie was helping Bill get the tree set up for decorating and that left Fleur, Ginny and Eleanor sitting in the living room by the fire relaxing with tea and chatting. Remembering the look she saw on Eleanor’s face earlier, Ginny mentioned it.

“Well, it’s nothing really, I guess, but I just found it interesting. Harry’s best friend is Ron, he and Charlie have so much in common with flying and then with Bill teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts yet he seems to be surrounded by women all the times I see him,” she said.

Ginny smiled and Fleur laughed a bit. Ginny said softly,

"I guess he just brings out the desire to care for him in us. He's had such a horrible time of it almost from the day he was born. I know he's said he feels his been very lucky about some things but when you really tally it all up life has been very unfair to him. I love him for a lot of different reasons but I think even if I didn't and I was only his best friend's sister I would still feel the need to look out for him."

"Oui," Fleur added. "He is destined for greatness but at such a high cost. E'en one way or another we all look after him to help him bear the terrible burden he carries."

Eleanor looked over at Harry and watched him grimace as Ron executed a daring assault that he didn't see coming. She took in the unruly hair and bright green eyes behind the round glasses and saw the grimace turn into a grin as he laughed at something Ron said but they couldn't hear.

"I remember when he came with you to your tryout. We had all heard of him of course. He was the 'famous' Harry Potter after all. But to meet him he was so quiet and deferential. It was hard to imagine he was the same person that did all those amazing things. And then to see him fly the way he did. I never asked you this, Gin, but was that business with the autographs really that surprising to him?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, I'm pretty sure that was the first time anyone had ever asked him for one and it genuinely surprised him that someone would want it. You remember what happened at the wedding reception with the Centaurs? I don't think you could hear it but one of them told me that I needed to take care of him because he had, now how did they put it, oh yeah, value far beyond his understanding. That pretty much sums it up. I think he knows deep down inside what he's capable of magically but I don't think he really has a clue about his effect on other people. How he can lead, teach, inspire, all that sort of thing. Sometimes when he really gets me exasperated I think it's probably better that he doesn't because of all the power he has but it's really so sad in a way. I blame it all on his aunt and uncle for the way they treated him all those years. I swear if I ever met them I'd give them both a good dose of the bat bogey hex," she said the last in a low venomous tone.

Eleanor looked at her friend and nodded. Then she smiled a bit and said,

"I'm not even sure why I thought I needed to know but..." she trailed off.

Ginny and Fleur just smiled. Fleur then looked at the somewhat older woman and said,

"Harry's welfare is the Weasley family's greatest concern. Welcome to the family."

The three smiled wide and Eleanor couldn't help but giggle a bit. Mrs. Weasley came over to sit with them, holding a cup of tea of her own.

"Well, my dears, what has you with your heads close?"

"We were filling Eleanor in on a few details about our Harry," Ginny said.

"Ah, yes, well I don't know what the future may hold for you and Charlie, my dear, although I have my hopes," which elicited more laughs, "but that young fellow over there, my son in all ways but one, sits at the very core of our family. We take his well being very seriously. We owe him more than we can ever hope to repay but the very least we can do for him is to be his family, the one thing he probably needs more than anything else."

As he sat at the board across from Ron, Harry could feel eyes on him so he looked up and over at the four women who were looking back at him with various expressions. He gave a crooked smile and wave and they waved back. He looked over at Ron who's own expression was clearly saying 'what's up, mate?' to which Harry could only shrug and shake his head. Ron did likewise and they resumed concentrating on the game. The muted conversation near the fireplace continued for some time.

Harry and Ron battled their way through three games, Harry losing all of them, but making Ron work for every captured piece. At the end of the third Harry sat back in his chair and said,

“Well, Ron, I think I can see why Evelyn Muntab has her eye on you. You’d make a good strategist for planning raids and such.”

“Thanks, Harry, and here all this time I thought it was because I was the boss’ best mate and brother-in-law,” he dead panned.

“That, too,” Harry replied just as seriously and they both started to laugh.

Lunch was a casual affair with a couple of platters of sandwich makings and a large tureen of soup and everyone simply helped themselves. Afterwards the ladies began to decorate the tree and the men folk assisted as directed. Mr. Weasley and Abagail had come in for lunch and although they passed Molly’s inspection for cleanliness suspicions ran high that the two had been ‘up to something’. By mid afternoon the tree was dazzling and George and Angelina had arrived. There were many hugs and handshakes and when Angelina found her way to Harry she gave him the usual long limbed tight embrace and then the once over.

“You’re looking good, Harry. A lot more rested and relaxed then you’ve been lately.”

“I’m glad it shows, Angelina. The last weeks have been pretty good ones. Plus the holidays are always a good time for me. As long as I’m not in hospital somewhere,” he said with a half grin.

Angelina smiled back and gave him another squeeze. They all took seats around the living room, enjoying the fire and company. Bill let his gaze sweep around the room and said,

“You know, I just realized, we have the makings of a real Quidditch team here. I wonder if we could arrange a family challenge match somewhere,” he said with a laugh.

"Well, I don't know about a family match but I do have an idea that might be interesting," Harry said.

"What's that, Harry?" Bill asked.

"When Ginny and I visited Beauxbaton during our honeymoon, they were conducting a two week camp or clinic I guess you'd call it for the Quidditch players. Very intensive training. We got to observe an afternoon's worth and I was thinking maybe we could propose something like that for Hogwarts. What do you think, Bill?"

"I think it's a great idea, Harry. I'll discuss it with Professor McGonagall when I get back. Do you think you'd be able to participate?"

"I'd certainly hope so, for what it's worth," he said.

Ginny stiffened at his side and he felt it. He tilted his head sideways and said quietly,

"I'm sorry."

Instead of replying directly to Harry she said,

"Personally, I think it would be worth a great deal. You should have seen him that afternoon. He was so fixated on the seekers that after the third time of trying to get through to him I gave up. After they were done and had invited us to comment to the players he proceeds to give them over an hour's worth of detailed analysis and recommendations. I bet they got more feedback in that hour then they did all week."

Harry sat there, his arm in a stranglehold by Ginny, trying to look undisturbed but inside he was turning three shades of red and squirming for all he was worth. The others began to discuss the whole idea of a Quidditch camp and Harry began to relax a bit as the focus was diverted away from him.

He looked around a bit and he caught Abigail's eye who was sitting at her usual spot next to Fleur. She gave him a quizzical look and

then slid off the couch and came over and climbed up to kneel next to him and wrap her arms around his neck and put her head close to his. He brought his free arm up and pulled her close. They stayed like that for a moment and then she loosened her grip as did he. When she leaned back and looked at Harry she had a sad smile on her face. She maneuvered around and sat down next to her guardian and pushed up close beside him. He looked across the room at Fleur who regarded him with her brilliant blue eyes and she could only give a brief shake of her head and one raised eyebrow. Whether anyone else was paying attention he couldn't tell. He caught a comment from Eleanor.

"You know if you combine the idea of Harry taking part, add Charlie in and get the notion across that this could improve the level of play for the pros as well as the national team I'd bet you'd get a lot of support from the teams and the Sports office in the Ministry. You could probably attract some big names to come, maybe even help with the training."

"Well, Bill can broach the idea at Hogwarts and I'll step in to see the folks at Magical Games and Sports and see what they think," Mr. Weasley said "but to be perfectly honest I think we have enough talent in this room right now to run a very respectable training camp."

This statement got a number of affirmative responses. Harry leaned back into the cushions of the couch and tried to relax some more. Ginny was pressed in on one side and Abigail on the other. He felt warm and comfortable and he began to drift a bit. While not exactly in that gray place that he and Abigail used to communicate he felt like he was floating a bit and he wasn't really hearing the conversations around him. Without any warning he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his head and brief image flashed in his mind. It was a figure, manlike but indistinct, as if shrouded in shadow with only two bright points of green where the eyes would have been. While not seeming particularly threatening it did seem to emanate a feeling of contempt, of overwhelming arrogance and disdain. Harry bolted upright on the couch and his eyes flew wide and as quickly as it came it disappeared.

"Harry, what is it?" Ginny asked in alarm.

“What? Oh, nothing, Gin, I’m sorry. I was just feeling so comfortable I guess I started to doze off and I just kind of jerked awake,” he managed to say.

“Oh, I just hate that,” Eleanor said. “You think you’re falling asleep and then your leg or arm twitches and you’re wide awake again.”

Harry just nodded but inwardly he was very grateful for the unsolicited support of his story.

The rest of the afternoon was given over to discussing the camp idea, how business was in Diagon Alley and the way things were drying up in Knockturn Alley as Harry and Milligan had been stepping up the pressure, cleaning out the criminal activity. Harry was content to sit back and listen but he was also contemplating that brief visual flash that had jerked him up so sharply. Was he imagining things or was it something akin to what had happened when he was seeing into Voldemort’s mind. Was there someone else out there? Was it whoever was behind the conspiracy? His musings were interrupted by a gentle prod from Ginny.

“Sweetheart, it’s time for dinner. Where did you go?”

“Oh, nowhere in particular. I was just thinking about a few things. We better go find a seat or we’ll miss dinner,” he said with a half smile.

She looked at him with a squint and then nodded and they got up and walked to the table. He sat down and once more he had Ginny to one side and Abigail to the other. A large ham was sliced and waiting as were roast potatoes, several vegetables and a plate heaped with Abigail’s rolls along with a crock of butter. Mr. Weasley presided over the serving of the ham while the bowls were passed around the table.

As they were eating Harry looked down at Abigail and said,

“So, little one, how was the Popular. Is Dad making any progress?”

“Yes but not as much as he hoped. He’s so busy at work and without me around to help it’s slow going,” she said.

“Well, hopefully, he’ll have some time while you’re home from school.”

Abigail smiled and nodded vigorously. Harry smiled back and continued eating and listening to the various conversations around the table. He turned when he heard Bill mention his name. Apparently Bill and his father were discussing the upcoming term and the topic of Harry’s lectures was mentioned. He thought he was due for a trip up and he’d have to give some thought to what he might talk about.

Dinner was a great success and there wasn’t much left to clean up. When Percy and Audrey arrived it was fortunate that they had already had dinner with Audrey’s parents. They all retired back to the living room but those that had them were taking their presents and placing them under the tree. Harry noticed that Abigail’s were all the same size and shape, a flat rectangle about a foot and a half by a foot but only about an inch thick. The rest were all shapes and sizes. It was going to be a busy morning tomorrow. He couldn’t wait.

They made it an early night so that they could get up early for Christmas breakfast. Harry lay awake for a while thinking about his ‘vision’ and worried a bit about what it meant but as he felt the warm presence of Ginny next to him and knew that the house was full of his family he let those thoughts drift away and he slipped into a deep, untroubled sleep.

Once again Abigail was sent up to wake them but instead of pounding on the bedroom door she decided to slip inside and take a more direct approach. She came to stand opposite the end of the bed with her back against the wall. She took a deep breath and then ran and jumped up to land in the middle of the bed between Harry and Abigail. They both awoke with a start and in a moment there was a three way wrestling match with a great deal of laughing until the two young women ganged up on the one young man and soon had him pinned.

“Ok, I give up, you got me.”

“Yeah, we’ve conquered the great Harry Potter,” Abigail crowed.

“That puts you in a class all by yourself, Abigail. No one ever has before and no one ever will again,” Ginny said laughing.

Harry scowled at his wife and then counter attacked with a vicious tickle blitz that soon rendered both his assailants helpless. He was then able to free himself from the tangle of blankets and gather his things for a quick shower. Within half an hour they were all gathered around the big table. Hermione had arrived earlier and soon they were tucking into to what could best be described as a Christmas breakfast feast. Spirits were running high and at one point Ron asked Harry,

“What was all that racket this morning, mate?”

“Ah, well, we were ambushed in our bed by the mighty mite here,” he began, looking down at Abigail. “Then my wife threw in with the enemy and they had me down for a moment but while they gloated I was able to get free. Funny how the evil ones always want to gloat over their fallen enemies and hence sow the seeds of their eventual defeat,” Harry finished up in his best professorial tones.

“Evil?” Ginny cried out in mock outrage. “You just wait and we’ll show you evil, right, Abigail?”

“I don’t know, Ginny. I think Harry’s right. It was kind of unfair that we ganged up on him and you took my side and all,” Abigail said, her voice just above a whisper as she looked up at Harry with those big dark soulful eyes. “I’m sorry, Harry,” she said, her lower lip started to quiver.

“Abigail, I was only teasing,” Harry said, his voice full of concern.

“Oh, good, so was I,” she said, her pout turning into a wide grin and her eyes dancing.

Harry just looked across at the others with the classic, ‘why me?’ expression. Everyone was laughing and all he could do was shake his head. Once breakfast was finished and the table cleared everyone made their way to the living room for the much anticipated

exchange of gifts. Everyone arranged themselves in pairs with Abigail sitting next to Harry for the one trio.

“Well, I must say,” began Mrs. Weasley, “this is certainly a much nicer Christmas than last year’s and my biggest present is having you all here happy, healthy and whole. It’s also so wonderful that we have some new faces with us this year. I thought since this is her first Christmas with us we’d give Abigail the honor of being the first to give out her gifts.”

“Oh, thank you, Mrs. Weasley. Um, I kinda got everyone the same thing so as not to spoil the surprise if you’d wait until everyone has theirs and you can open them at the same time,” she said as she had gotten off the couch and moved to gather up the plainly wrapped rectangles. “There’s one for each couple.”

She handed one to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, each of the sons and their significant other and lastly to Harry and Ginny. Abigail’s expression was tentative and then she said,

“I hope you like them. Go ahead and open them.”

The sound of wrapping paper being torn was followed by several gasps and then silence. Abigail was looking around at everyone in concern.

“What, you don’t like them?” she said with a quiver in her voice.

Fluer was the first to recover.

“Oh, no, Abigail. Thees ees magnifique, incroyable,” the silver haired beauty said.

What she was looking at was a pen and ink portrait of herself and Bill from the shoulders up. The likeness was exact right down to the last line of the faintest scar on Bill’s face. Abigail had also used a light tint to suggest the color of her silver hair and Bill’s red. The other couples were all looking at similar portraits of themselves with the same color accenting where appropriate. In particular, the green for Harry’s eyes stood out boldly from the canvas.

Unasked for, everyone holding a canvas turned them around so they all could see them. Abigail still had an expectant look. Mrs. Weasley was the next to find her voice.

“Oh, my dear. These are amazing. Whenever did you find the time to do all this?”

“I started on them right after getting back to Hogwarts. You had all been so good to me last summer, I wanted to do something special. After the funeral I had a lot of time and working on these helped me a lot,” she said with a shy smile.

“Well, all I can say is thank you and I think I’d ask you when you have time this summer to do something like this but with the whole family together that we can hang here right in the living room,” Mrs. Weasley said, all teary eyed.

Abigail smiled a bit wider and turned and pulled out a slightly larger wrapped rectangle and handed it to Mrs. Weasley who carefully opened it. She let out another gasp and the tears began to flow freely. Abigail had anticipated her request and resting on Molly Weasley’s lap was a drawing similar to the photograph that hung in Harry’s office but with one significant addition. Behind and higher than the rest was the face and upper torso of Fred, looking down on the rest with his patented mischievous grin. Mrs. Weasley wordlessly handed the canvas to her husband and opened her arms to Abigail who rushed into her tight embrace. Once freed Abigail had to make a circuit of the room where she received the thanks and embraces of the rest. When she finally took her seat next to Harry she was one very happy young lady.

Mrs. Weasley began to hand out gifts from under the tree as they fell to hand and soon brightly colored paper was accumulating around the room. Some of the highlights included a set of flying robes for Abigail as well as coveralls for her for those times spent on the Popper. Harry gave Charlie a pair of fire proof gloves made by the muggles for firefighters. Eleanor approved of this gift a great deal. A particularly interesting gift that Harry gave to Ginny was a small case no more than six by nine inches. The most interesting aspect of it was

that when tapped by a wand and the word 'patefacio' spoken the case opened up into a small writing desk that included a space to store parchment sheets, an inkwell and several quills.

"I thought this might help with your writing for the Prophet, love," Harry said.

"Oh, Harry, this is terrific. Thank you," she replied happily.

Ron and Harry had agreed not to exchange any gifts since their relationship as superior/subordinate might complicate things. Besides, what could they give each other that was anymore significant then what they had shared in the past. After all the gifts had been handed out and everyone was looking over what everyone else had received Ron coughed a bit to get their attention.

"Um, I have one last thing to give and it's for Hermione. It's not a really a surprise to her but I thought this was the best place to do it," he said and he pulled a small box out of his pocket. "Hermione, this is for you."

She took the box and opened it and revealed a beautiful diamond engagement ring. Her eyes started to mist up as she took it out and let Ron slip it onto her finger. The two had been discussing the idea of getting married ever since Harry and Ginny's wedding and had made some plans for the coming year but the actuality represented by the ring had its effect. She grabbed Ron around the neck and held on tight while the others began to gather round to offer their congratulations. All in all it was a very fine Christmas indeed.

Over the next few weeks Harry didn't have a reoccurrence of the briefly flashed image but it still haunted him. One evening after they had finished their dinner he sat alone in his chair in his study, thinking about it and what it might mean. He tried to relax and recall what led to the vision. He sat with half lidded eyes and his breathing slow and measured. His minds eye could see nothing of any consequence, just a dull grey. He was casting about for some clue when he felt that same jab and the image of the shadowed figure appeared. Having

some expectation this time he didn't make any movement that might cause the image to disappear. The pain faded as quickly as it had come. For a long moment the two regarded each other until Harry 'spoke'.

"What are you?"

"Better for you to ask, who am I?" the figure retorted in a 'voice' that dripped of arrogance and sarcasm.

"Very well, who are you?" Harry asked evenly.

"More the fool are you for not recognizing me," the image sneered.

"Why should I know you? I've only seen you the one other time and that was just a flash."

The green 'eyes' flared momentarily as the 'voice' laughed in condescension. The dark shadow that surrounded the image contracted and the vague outline began to sharpen. The figure was indeed that of a man of medium height and build but that gave the impression of being much larger and more powerful. The image began to look disturbingly familiar. As if stepping into the light the shadows dropped away and Harry found he was looking at himself, but not the 'him' he knew.

"I am the you you could be if you cast off all this nonsense of self doubt and false modesty and realized just who and what you are."

"And just who might that be?"

"The most powerful wizard of the age, perhaps for many ages. Others know it to be true, yet you persist in this ridiculous charade, cringing at every compliment and shaking off every accolade when you should be demanding and receiving the adulation of all these lesser beings."

"To what end? What good would all that do for me?"

"End? For its own end, to have what is rightfully yours. You saved them from themselves and their ignorance and stupidity. At every turn

you demonstrate your superiority and yet you labor away in a tiny office behind a tiny desk to resolve everyone else's problems but your own. You bear the scars, you suffer the pain and they blissfully go on their way thinking themselves worthy of your sacrifices."

Harry had to admit that, despite the venom with which the statements were being made and the words being used, the basics were not far from the mark. His entire life was shaped by the inability or unwillingness of the wizarding world to have come to terms with Voldemort when they had the chance. He had given so much of himself and yet there were still those who thought the old ways were still best and others thought he was someone they should fear, much as they had feared Riddle.

"Ahh, so you see the wisdom of my words. Your words in point of fact. Everyone around you seeks to attach themselves to your glory. The Ministry, Hogwarts, those French upstarts, even those redheaded fools who were little more than hedge wizards until they found you."

The last comment caught Harry's attention and focused it like a beam of light. No matter what he might feel about his efforts and injuries nothing would or could make him think or feel that way about his family. He knew this was not some other 'him' speaking from the darker recesses of his mind. Someone was playing games.

Harry regarded the figure more intently. Now it was an investigation, not some internal conflict. The figure did resemble him but the eyes were more like green globes as opposed to real green eyes and the tussled hair lacked any real definition. It was more a caricature drawn by inference than a likeness taken from his mind. Abigail would have laughed at the amateurish attempt.

"Afraid you've mucked it up there, whoever you are. The first part of your argument had some merit to it but that last bit about my family ruined the whole thing," Harry said.

"Don't be a fool, you know what I say is true. These are your own words," the voice said with the same malice and contempt but there was also a hint of doubt.

“Don’t waste my time,” Harry said, beginning to grow annoyed at the game. “I’m beginning to have my suspicions as to just who or what you are and I’d suggest you go find some hole to hide in because should the time come when we meet, you’ll surely regret it. Now get out of my head and stay out.”

With that Harry reached out to give the figure a mental slap to which he added some of the heat he felt rising up inside him. He saw the figure flinch and the left side of the vague face began to smolder. The figure began to quickly recede accompanied by a keening wail. To Harry’s mind’s eye it looked as if whoever had ‘linked’ to him was losing his, or her, control of the sending because he started to get glimpses of a room and just before the contact broke he thought he caught a brief sense of an old castle or large stone manor at some height, perhaps on a hilltop, but it all went blank before he could really focus on it.

He blinked back to being fully awake and looked around the room. The comforting familiarity of his study helped settle his mind as he tried to process what had just happened. That someone was trying to influence him was certain. What exactly he had hoped to gain was another question. It was obvious that he was trying to get Harry to accept that he was some sort of super wizard and he should be holding himself above those around him. Was this an attempt to get him to align himself with this other person or was it intended to isolate and weaken him somehow? And was this some new threat or was it connected to the smuggler/conspiracy problem? He thought about all of this for some time until a voice brought him back to the here and now.

“Harry. Is everything all right, sweetheart?”

“More or less, Ginny, why?” he replied.

“Well, I had been upstairs working on my next article and I came down to get some tea and I walked by your door here and I thought I smelled smoke. You’re not taking up cigars are you?” she said half joking.

“No, love, I’m not in here smoking cigars,” he said but he stood up and looked around the room.

None of the furnishings were singed nor were any of his clothes. He carefully checked every nook and corner and found nothing. He could only look at his wife and shrug. She regarded him with a quizzical look and then shaking her head a bit walked on toward the kitchen and the tea kettle. Harry stared at the floor for a moment and remembered the smoldering face of the figure before it receded out of sight. He likewise shook his head and decided a cup of tea sounded like a very good idea.

Over the next couple of days Harry took whatever opportunity that presented itself to consider what had transpired during the latest ‘visitation’. He tried to recall the details of the last few seconds to try and glean any information about where the stone manor or castle had been. He even contacted Charlie Weasley who paid Harry a visit at the Ministry to discuss it.

“Charlie, I need to ask you some questions about your time in Romania but I can’t really tell you why yet,” Harry said as he sat across from his brother-in-law.

“Well, I guess I owe you one after all the secrecy about that mutated dragon, but I hope at some point you can tell me the whole story,” Charlie replied.

“I will if I ever find out the whole story. What I need to know is what the place was like. I have a picture in my mind of a brief glimpse of a stone manor or castle sitting on a hill. Did you ever see anything like that?”

“Sure, Harry. There were more than a few like that, but I’ve got to tell you that that’s not uncommon for more than a few areas in Europe. I mean Hungary, the Czech Republic are just a couple of countries that have places like that. Even the Scottish Highlands have them.”

“I understand that, Charlie. It’s just for some reason I got the feel or the idea that it might have been Romania. When I was growing up at the Dursleys, Dudley used to get to go to the movies a lot. I never got

to go but one time, after I had managed to scrape together enough loose change I went myself. It turned out to be an old monster movie, Frankenstein vs. Dracula or something like that. It was supposed to be located in Transylvania and the castle was where most of the story took place. The flashes I got seemed to remind me of that. That's why I was asking."

"What do you think this is all about, Harry?" Charlie asked.

"I wish I knew, Charlie. I'm not sure if it's related to the smuggling business or if it points to something new or if it's nothing more than just random flashes coming up from my subconscious. I'm trying to figure it all out," he said a bit despondently.

"Have you thought about asking Abigail about it?"

"I try to leave her as my last resort. I'm always worried that she might 'see' something that will upset her. But I think I may just have to do that pretty soon. Either it's something important I need to look into or just odd images that I need to forget about. Guess I need to take a trip up there."

"I know you worry about her, Harry. But Abigail is a pretty tough young lady. Don't let her small size fool you. I had a chance to talk to her a lot this past summer when I went home and flew with her. She's very committed to you and is determined to help you do the things we need you to do. Give her the chance," Charlie said seriously.

"I suppose you're right, Charlie. I guess I still see her as that frightened first year. Thanks for your time, I appreciate it."

"Not a problem, Harry. We're all in this together."

Harry escorted Charlie back up to the lobby where they both Disapparated, Harry to Hogsmeade and Charlie back to where ever it was he was doing his research. Harry arrived at his usual spot at the entrance to the memorial park. He'd have to come down and visit his lost friends and family after he was done with Abigail. He made his way up to the front door and knocked using the massive iron ring.

Argus Filch yanked the door open, eyed Harry up and down and just waved him through the door. Harry swallowed his smile and gave his old nemesis a nod and proceeded toward the Heads office. It was mid-morning and he hoped to catch the Headmistress in. He never made it to that far. He met her coming the other way.

“Harry! What a pleasant surprise. What brings you to us today? I understand your next lecture isn’t for several more weeks,” Professor McGonagall said by way of greeting.

“Yes, ma’am, that’s right. I have a problem and need Abigail’s help. I was wondering if I could speak with her.”

“I’m sure we can arrange that, Harry, although I’m not sure where she is at the moment,” the Head replied.

Harry pulled out a sheet of parchment. He had asked Abigail to write out her schedule for him in case of just such a need. He looked at it and said,

“She’s with Hagrid for Care of Magical Creatures. Put I wouldn’t just go there directly.”

“Well, thank you, Harry. I appreciate that but please, feel free to go down there. When you’re done come back up to my office. I’m sure Dumbledore would be happy to see you as would the others,” the Professor said.

“Yes, ma’am. I will.”

Harry turned and went down and let himself out the main door and made his way down towards Hagrid’s hut. He could see the fourth years arrayed around the fence of Hagrid’s corral. Harry could see Abigail looking through the space of the split rails and oddly enough, Norbie, the big brindled Mastiff that was Hagrid’s standing next to her. Inside the corral were several Hippogriffs. Harry approached the rear of the group of students and stood watching. A couple of students sensed Harry standing behind them and turned to look at him. With a motion of his hand and nod of his head he directed their attention back to the lesson. Hagrid was using the Hippogriffs to illustrate the

idea of hybrid magical animals. As he talked he looked around and noticed Harry standing to the rear of his students and smiled and waved. His voice rang out over the crowd.

“Well, Harry, good ta see ya. Come on up front.”

Harry smiled and made his way up to the fence and smiled at Hagrid.

“Good morning, Professor. I didn’t mean to interrupt your class. I was hoping to speak to Abigail when you’re done,” Harry said.

“Sure thing, Harry, and yer never an interruption. Maybe ya can help me a bit.”

“Of course. What can I do?”

“I thought mebbe ya could come in and say hello ta an old friend of yers,” Harry said motioning to a large Hippogriff standing over by the far fence.

Harry smiled and nodded and moved over to the gate and opened it. He entered the corral and approached his old friend Buckbeak. He stopped a dozen or so paces away and bowed deeply to the fierce looking creature. Buckbeak tossed his head and bowed as well. Harry walked up and placed his hand on the feathered head and let his fingers rub just above the eye ridges. He could hear the faint vocalizations as the eye lids slid down. He could hear Hagrid in the background.

“Now, that’s the way ya approach one of these proud creatures. It ain’t always that easy, o’ course. Harry, I mean, Mr. Potter and Buckbeak are old friends. Mebbe one of ya would like ta meet Buckbeak.”

Abigail’s hand shot straight up. Hagrid nodded and waved her in. Abigail hurried around to the gate and Hagrid let her in. Norbie had followed but wouldn’t enter. Abigail approached to about the same distance as had Harry and she bowed deeply, her long dark hair nearly reaching the ground. Without any prompting from Harry, ‘Beaky’ bowed deeply as well. She approached and since she

couldn't reach up as high as his head, Beaky bent his neck and allowed her to rub the same spot as Harry had been. Harry looked down and smiled as he saw the mesmerized look on his ward's face.

"He's magnificent, isn't he, Abigail?" Harry asked quietly.

"Oh, yes, sir. Is it true that you've really flown on him?" she whispered in awe.

"Oh, yes. Several times. Maybe he'd take you for a ride."

Abigail's eyes went wide and Harry looked over at Hagrid.

"What do you think, Hagrid. Is Buckbeak still up to having passengers?" Harry asked.

"Oh, aye, Harry. Still as strong as ever. He'll take ya both easily."

Harry lifted Abigail up and helped her find a spot on Buckbeak's back and he then climbed aboard himself. Without prompting the Hippogriff took several strides forward and with two powerful thrusts of his wings launched himself and his passengers skyward to the stunned amazement of the students. Abigail was squealing in delight and Harry laughed as the wind whipped their robes and Abigail's hair behind them. They flew past the castle and out over the lake buzzing the water. He gained altitude and took them over the town of Hogsmeade. In all they spent fifteen or twenty minutes in the air before Buckbeak brought them down to the corral again. When he came to a stop Harry slid off and helped the red faced and smiling child off the broad back. He whispered in her ear and then she walked over to the rack where the dead ferrets were hanging. Gingerly she slipped one down and walked over and threw it to Buckbeak, who gulped it down eagerly. Abigail's feet barely touched the ground as they walked out of the corral.

"Well, class, that's about as good as it gets. Next class you'll all practice what ya just saw and mebbe one or two of ya will get the chance ta take a ride," Hagrid said.

Harry looked down at Abigail and said,

"I need your help, little one," he said seriously. "Let's sit over in front of Hagrid's house."

"Yes, sir."

They took a seat and Norbie strolled over and sat down so his back rested against Abigail's legs. Harry looked at her with a question clear on his face.

"Ever since that time those men tried to take me, whenever I'm down here Norbie always stays very close by. I think he figures I need protection," she said with a grin.

"Good boy, Norbie," Harry said with a smile. "Now, to business. Abigail, I've had a strange couple of visions. The first was on Christmas day. Do you remember when I was sitting between you and Ginny and I kind of sat up really suddenly?"

"Yes, sir. You said you were just dozing off and jerked awake. I knew that wasn't really true but I try not to say things about what happens to you unless you ask me."

"I thought that might be the case. Well, a few days ago I had a more serious vision. I think that someone, probably a pretty strong witch or wizard is trying to get me to do something. I think I stopped them but they left an image in my head as they were leaving. I'm trying to figure out where the place I'm seeing is. I thought you might be able to help."

"Yes, sir. I'll try," she said.

She took hold of Harry's hand and sat back and let her eyes close. She sat quietly for a few moments and then began to talk in a low whisper.

"You saw a stone building, like a big house sitting on a hill. The hill is surrounded by a large forest, a scary forest, kind of like this forest here. It's hard to tell where it is. It's like there's some kind of shield around it. But there is someone or something there and it's very nasty.

It feels like what I felt when I was 'reading' those smugglers you caught. I'm pretty sure this is where the leader of that group is," she said and then went quiet.

Harry looked down at her and saw that she was still concentrating, her grip on his hand tightening. Her lips tightened and then she began to speak again.

"The portal thing that you found in the basement of the potions store is the way. There is a link in that stone building. I think it goes to other buildings as well."

Her grip on his hand loosened and she sagged against Harry but looked up at him with wide open eyes though she was definitely fatigued.

"Thank you, little one. I'm sorry it took so much out of you. Do you see why I want to be careful about this? We need to talk some more about your plans for the future, but I'll deal with this first."

"You need to be careful, Harry. What I saw wasn't good. I don't know what Voldemort felt like but I can't imagine him being worse than whatever is in that building," she said.

"I will. But first we need to get you back up to the castle and some lunch. That will make you feel better," Harry said.

They stood up and hand in hand walked back up to the castle and into the Great Hall where lunch was just being served. He made sure she got to her seat and then mentioned to several of the senior students that she might need to be watched for the afternoon. They assured him that she would be looked after. He then walked up to the head table and quietly thanked Professor McGonagall for allowing him to intrude and apologized for not being able to stay and visit the other Heads. He gave Bill a brief nod, who returned it with one of his own along with a quizzical look. Harry left the Hall and the castle and hurried down to Hogsmeade. He took a walk through the memorial park stopping where he saw a familiar name, pausing longest at Fred's graveside. He could see that fresh flowers had been placed before the headstone. He nodded his head as if he had resolved an

internal question and he Disapparated back to the Ministry and went into his office. He took a quill and wrote a message to Ginny and then a second one for Maxwell. He left the one for Maxwell on his desk and took the other with him.

He made his way up to the lobby and Disapparated to the front door of the London house. As always Kreacher let him in and bowed deeply. When he looked up Harry, his big liquid eyes were more somber than Harry had ever seen them, but the little elf said nothing.

“Kreacher, I have some work to do. I’m not sure when I’ll get back but I need you to give this to Ginny when she comes home.”

“Yes, Master Harry. Kreacher will be here when Mistress Ginny returns. Kreacher will be here when Master Harry returns as well.”

“Thanks, Kreacher. I just need to get a few things. Could you put some food and a flask of water in a bag for me?”

“Certainly, Master Harry.”

Harry went to his study and took off his robe and laid it on his desk chair. He pulled on a short jacket and made sure his wand was firmly tucked into his belt. He looked at the picture of all his family and perhaps the magic allowed them to grasp the seriousness of what he was about since there were no waves or smiles. He knew he had to do this, for them, if for no other reason. He went back to the entry hall where Kreacher stood and took the offered canvas bag and looped the strap over his head. He just nodded and smiled at the little elf. He went out onto the stoop and Disapparated to Diagon Alley near Gringotts and he quickly made his way to the entrance to Knockturn Alley, hoping to avoid anyone he knew. He made it unmolested and hurried down the stairs and came to the door of the closed potion shop. The door was locked which he made quick work of. He knew that an alarm would sound in the Ministry and someone would be there soon to check on it but he hoped to be on his way by then. He quickly entered and hurried down the stairs to the basement.

Unlike his last time there, it was empty of everything except the Spatial Distortion Portal which someone had chosen to block with

some muggle yellow tape declaring it a 'crime scene'. He pulled this down and after taking a breath stepped into the portal. He felt the mild sense of dislocation but instead of stepping forward to enter the empty warehouse in Derbyshire he stood still to get acclimated to the deep darkness and to let his senses roam out about him. With his eyes shut he reached out trying to find that same image that was left with him for a fleeting moment at the end of his encounter with whomever it was he now needed to find. He wasn't sure how long he stood there but he finally began to sense what Abigail must have seen. A solid structure shielded somehow but reeking of menace and the feel of a portal. The sense was strongest to his right so he turned and against all advice to the contrary walked into the darkness away from the familiar portals.

The darkness was total and the feel of mild dislocation constant but all in all it wasn't as bad as trying to fly and catch a snitch in a driving rain storm or raging blizzard. The darkness also made it impossible to see anything with his eyes open so he kept them closed and this kept him on a straight line to whatever awaited him. As he walked along he began to feel that familiar heat that told him his temper was starting to build. Once more he was preparing to face a threat to his world, his friends, his family. Could there be no end to this? Was his life to be a never ending stream of solving one problem only to be presented with another?

He had no idea how long he walked, for the darkness blotted out all sense of time, nor of the commotion his notes had set off at the Ministry and the Burrow. Better he didn't for he needed to concentrate on the task at hand. He would occasionally open his eyes to see if he was getting close but no portal showed. He stopped for a moment and took a drink from the flask in the bag. He closed his eyes once more and just a bit to the right of straight ahead he got the distinct impression of an opening. He adjusted his direction and before he walked another hundred paces he came to a rectangle of dim light, visible only by contrast to the absolute darkness that surrounded it. Harry paused and looked out of the portal as best he could without stepping through. The portal opened into a large dank, unlit room. The dankness implied a basement of sorts and the only light was provided by whatever leaked through a decrepit looking door at the top of a worn flight of stone stairs.

Harry took a deep breath and took out his wand and stepped out of the portal. Nothing happened. No alarms, no sudden assaults, nothing. So far, so good. He moved to the bottom of the steps and slowly began making his way up to the door. There was no sound, no voices, no dripping of water, nothing but the silence of a tomb. He gave his head a shake and decided this wasn't a very good line of thinking so he simply concentrated on matching the silence as he moved. He suddenly realized he hadn't taken his Invisibility Cloak but he just as quickly determined that it probably didn't matter since whoever or whatever he was going to encounter was probably powerful enough to 'see' him no matter what magic he employed.

At the top of the stairs he paused at the door and listened and 'looked' as best as he could but still there was no indication that the building was occupied. But he knew it was, he could feel it. The door moved at his touch and he eased his way through the narrow opening. He closed his eyes and his mind's eye told him he should move to the right. The long narrow corridor he found himself in led away into a twilight darkness perhaps a hundred paces away. He moved as quietly as he could manage until he stood at the entrance to a large room with a vaulted ceiling barely visible in the gloom above. Across the room was a stone dais that rose above the floor in three levels. On the topmost level was a large wooden high back chair that resembled a throne. Seated in this chair was perhaps the oldest looking person Harry had ever seen. A skeletally thin frame was draped in ornate and heavy robes and a large wizard's hat rested on the bald head. The wizard's eyes were closed but Harry was sure he was aware of his surroundings. Harry moved cautiously along the wall opposite the dais and he came to a stop directly across from where the wizened old man sat. Harry waited. As he examined the old man Harry thought he could see faint traces of red on the left side of the wizard's face. Finally the eye lids raised and a dry chuckle reached Harry's ears.

"So, Harry Potter, you choose to seek me out. How very brave of you, or perhaps foolish would be more appropriate," the wizard said in a lightly accented voice. "How clever of you to use the portal to find me. A shame you won't be using it to find your way home."

"Perhaps I'll take the train," Harry said as he eyed the old man.

The dry chuckle rattled out across the room.

"Bravo, Harry Potter, a wizard of wit and bravery. It was my intention to persuade you to join me but I must admit I didn't hold out much hope that it would happen. At least my little visit saved me the trouble of seeking you out myself."

Harry was growing tired of the old man's talking and he could feel the heat begin to build again. He let his eyes shift around the room but there was no other obvious ways in or out.

"No, Mr. Potter, there are no other ways in or out of this room and there is no one else here. My minions are no use to me if they are not out in the world doing my bidding."

"Just what is your bidding, if you don't mind my asking? What is it you want?" Harry asked.

"What else is there for wizards such as we? Power, Harry Potter, power. Not just the magic power but the power over others to compel them to do as I wish."

Harry shook his head and the anger began to grow. The grip on his wand was once again tightening to whiten his knuckles. Here was another stupid wizard willing to sink the world into misery and chaos for his own selfish ends. Stupid perhaps, but certainly powerful. That he could sense.

"Don't include me in that. I have no desire to bend others to my desires. I think we had that conversation the other day. Up here," Harry said as he tapped his head.

"Then you are indeed a fool, Harry Potter, for to possess such power and not to exercise it fully is both a waste and an insult. An insult to all who must hide themselves from those groveling muggle bugs. But that time is soon to come to an end. Your nemesis Voldemort had the right of it but he blundered. He thought the answer was to cheat death.

He wasted his energy and his being with those foolish horcruxes of his and to no end. To be beaten by a child."

"You're the fool if you think one child defeated Riddle and his thugs. They were beaten by dozens and dozens of witches and wizards who banded together against them. Your way is no better. You will follow Riddle because I see that that is what must happen. Even if I have to die to make it happen," Harry said, the rage building more and more.

If Harry had been paying attention to more than just his adversary he would have noticed the red glow reflecting back off the floor and nearby furnishings. The wizened old wizard noticed and it likely prompted his next move. His wand flicked out quickly from beneath his robe and quickly incanted the death curse. Harry as quickly pointed his wand and shouted 'Expelliarmus'. The green and red beams met in mid air and the deflected death curse fired back past the old wizard who had barely managed to evade it. Harry was literally burning with rage now. He felt like he would fly apart, that he wasn't big enough to contain all the energy that was building within him. As he looked at the old man who was trying to prepare his next assault he could only see him through a red haze.

Within two heartbeats Harry was looking down at the thin, insignificant old man from a much higher vantage point. The room felt small and confining. He could feel his back pressing against the wall. As the old man looked up at him he was cringing back into his puny excuse of a throne. Harry couldn't help but laugh out loud and the resulting jet of flame burned the top half of the throne's tall padded back off. Harry blinked once and felt a mild burning sensation in his throat. He coughed heavily and the entire throne and its occupant flared and then collapsed into a pile of glowing embers. Harry was still extraordinarily angered at having to have wasted so much of his valuable time to come all this way to deal with just a pathetic excuse for a wizard. He tried to raise his head to see around the room but he hit it sharply on the ceiling. It hurt enough to ratchet up his anger and he lashed out heavily with his massive tail which took out most of one wall, the stones falling outward to tumble down the hillside. Harry decided disposing of the puny little wizard wasn't enough. He needed to eradicate the entire structure to convince these idiots that they weren't going to be allowed to intrude on his life or that of his family.

He dropped down onto his front legs and began to flail about with his massive tail and widened the opening he had made with the first swipe. He shouldered aside more of the stone and felt it tumble and bounce off him as he moved outside. One more good swipe and half the ceiling caved into the recently vacated room. He unfurled his mighty wings and with a lunge forward and up he took to the air. Several more deep sweeps and he had gained sufficient altitude to get a look at the outside of the stone structure. It reeked of age and deeply engrained evil. He was sure this was a place where many evil deeds had been committed through the ages and it was time for it to end. He coughed once more and a huge ball of flame slammed through the opened section of ceiling and set the fallen timbers ablaze. He coughed again and another fireball struck the remaining section of the roof that had remained intact and the force of the impact blew the whole lot down into the structure in flames. He tucked his legs in and dove on the fiercely burning structure, pulling up at the last moment and lashing the corner where the side and front walls met smashing them inward. He let the hot air rising off the burning mass to push him steadily upward.

He thought to himself that this was how flying was supposed to be done. Not astride some little piece of wood but relying only on the strength of your flight muscles and the sweep of your own wings. He circled above the rapidly collapsing structure and sensed a dim line running from where the basement room he had entered would have been. It continued to the west and then split to go both west and north. He assumed west would take him home but he was not ready for that. He decided to follow the northern route and see where it led him. He climbed for more altitude and set off at high speed to the north. He wound up flying all night long, finding three more warehouses linked to the now destroyed stone manor. Each warehouse was systematically destroyed with tail, claw and a final burst of flame. In each case several wizards attempted to intervene but they were quickly dealt with. His last flight was the longest, taking him back to England and the old barn in Derbyshire that he had come to know so well. It was still dark in the early morning hours when he landed heavily on the roof, only to have it collapse under his feet.

He heard several shouts but he had sensed that those alive in the building had been clustered by the portal and were not near where he now stood. As quickly as he settled he rose up again with the steady beat of tireless wings. He knew it was time to return home before the sun arose so he turned south and beat steadily toward the horizon.

At the Burrow, the Weasley clan including Abigail were dozing, having spent the last several days gathered in collective worry at the disappearance of Harry. His message to Ginny read,

My Dearest Ginny,

I have to leave for a while. I have a lead that only I can follow. I know what I've said in the past about team work but there is so much that is unknown I can't risk anyone else. I don't know how long I'll be gone but I will be thinking of you every minute I am away. Know that I love you more than my own life.

Forever yours,

Harry.

Combined with the note that he left with Maxwell about the need to pursue a lead and the unauthorized entrance into the potion shop had everyone speculating and worrying. So it was that in the minutes before sunrise most in the house were awakened by the sound of a harsh wind and a heavy thump in the field across from the Burrow. Abigail was the first to rush out the front door to see what was going on clad in her sleeping gown and heavy robe. She let out a soft cry as she saw the familiar figure who trudged wearily across the field towards her. They met at the side of the road that separated the field from the front yard and Harry wrapped his arms around her. She looked up at her guardian and her eyes went as wide as Harry had ever seen. She saw the slightly elongated pupils surrounded by green return to full roundness.

"Oh my, Harry," she said, shaking her head.

Harry pulled her tight again and whispered in her ear.

"It will have to be our secret for now, little one, just the two of us. Please," he said, his voice calm and quiet.

"Yes, Harry, I understand," she said and took hold of his hand.

As they walked hand in hand toward the house more people began to pour out of the front door, calling out. Harry would have to find a way to explain without revealing all. He wondered if he could.

Harry's Future, Part 22

Ginny sat in a chair that was pulled into the room that she and Harry always shared when they visited the Burrow. She sat and watched her husband sleeping. He had walked out of the field across the road from the house just as the sun was rising. He looked exhausted and somewhat distracted. He asked for something to eat and drink and that someone contact the Ministry and let them know he was back. He had been missing for three days. When informed of this fact by his nearly hysterical wife he gave her an odd look and said,

"Three? Funny, it felt like less then a day."

He then pulled Ginny into his arms and held her tightly as his entire body was wracked with shaking, much the same as had happened after the Centaurs had given him the bow and quiver of arrows. With her brother Bill's help they got him to the kitchen table where he polished off two tall tumblers of pumpkin juice and a plate full of cheese and meat slices and some bread from last nights dinner.

No one asked any questions. They knew he would tell them what he could, when he could. He was in bed before the sun had separated from the eastern horizon and it was now well past sunset and he hadn't stirred. Only the gentle rise and fall of his chest and the occasional movement of his eyes gave any hint that he still lived. Ginny kept her vigil alone. Abigail had paid a brief visit around mid-morning to say her goodbyes. Bill was taking her back to Hogwarts via the floo network. Mrs. Weasley had come by at lunch time to give her a small tray. Most of it remained untouched. She looked at Harry's pale face and the famous scar that looked somehow different tonight. Not as vivid as it once was. She said softly to herself,

"Where have you been, my love, and what terrible thing have you had to do this time?"

Tears ran down her cheek to fall into her lap. Around midnight as she dozed in the chair she was awakened by a noise. She opened her eyes and saw Harry stumble past her as he made his way to the door, out into the hallway and down to the nearest bathroom. She waited until she heard his bare feet padding back down the corridor. He

walked back into the room and headed straight for the bed. As he crawled back under the covers he stopped and looked over at Ginny with the squint he always had when he wasn't wearing his glasses.

"Have you been up reading, luv? It's getting late. Why don't you come to bed?"

"Alright, Harry. You're right. I will," she replied quietly.

She stood up and walked to her side of the bed, disrobed and climbed under the covers. She snuggled up to Harry and wrapped her arms around him. His skin felt warm, but dry. At least he wasn't feverish she thought. She heard him let out a long sigh and fall asleep. It took her some time to follow his example but at least for the first time in three days she knew where he was sleeping.

Ginny woke up when she felt Harry stirring. When his eyes opened she thought they looked unfocused but that quickly past and she saw a small smile curl the end of his lips.

"Good morning, love. You alright this morning?" Harry asked quietly.

"I'm fine, now that you're home. Any chance of getting an explanation of where you went and why?"

"There is but can I have a little bit of time to pull my thoughts together? Things are a little jumbled up at the moment."

"Ok, sweetheart but don't keep me waiting long. You know what we agreed about secrets," she said.

"I know. It's not that I don't want to tell you. I just don't know how to tell you. Not yet," he replied.

"Well, the first thing you need to do is go take a shower. You have the smell of smoke and old basements about you. Then you need to have some breakfast."

"Yes, ma'am. They sound like brilliant ideas," he said and smiled crookedly.

Approximately half an hour later Harry was walking down the stairs that led to the kitchen. The occupants of the kitchen table all turned to look at him. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Charlie, Ron and Hermione sat there, disregarding their plates as Ginny hurried over to meet him.

“How are you feeling, Harry?”

“A lot more human after a good shower, thanks, love. A good breakfast should complete the transformation,” he said.

He noticed that Charlie was giving him a very speculative look. He made eye contact with everyone at the table as he walked over. He wrapped Mrs. Weasley in a hug around the shoulders as she sat.

“Morning, Mum.”

“Good morning, Harry dear.”

“Dad,” he said by way of greeting as he sat down.

“Morning, son.”

It was obvious everyone was reluctant to say anything that in any way was connected with his disappearance until he did. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Well, I know you’d all like a nice clear explanation about what happened, but right now I’m pretty sure I can’t give you one. There are a lot of details I just don’t know. Like how what seemed like only a little more than half a day was in fact more like three. What I can say is that I had the opportunity to put an end to the whole business behind those smugglers and I took it. As it turned out it was most likely the right choice since with what happened there was no way I could have made sure anyone else would have been safe. You can beat me up about it all you want but that’s one thing I’m sure of. Just about the only thing.”

“No one is going to beat you up about anything right now, Harry. We’re just happy you’re home and safe,” Mr. Weasley said.

"That's right, for now, let's just make sure you get some breakfast. It's been a whole day since you ate last," Mrs. Weasley added.

Harry heartily approved of this idea. He was ravenously hungry and went through two helpings of everything that was put in front of him. Near the end of the second helping he looked up at Ron and Hermione and asked,

"No work for you two today?"

"Um, well, Harry, when word got to the Ministry that you had returned the Director asked me to see how you were and to let him know. Kinda sounds like I'm spying on you, doesn't it?"

"Only if you were doing it on the sly. It's ok, Hermione. What about you, Ron?"

"I'm with her," Ron said, pointing at Hermione with his thumb. "Although, Mr. Maxwell wanted me to ask when you'd be available to brief him and Mr. Milligan about what went on. I gotta tell you, Harry. There were some weird things being talked about in the Auror break room late yesterday."

"What were you doing in there, Ron? You're still a Patroller."

"I got cornered and pulled in. After word got back that you had returned and in reasonably good shape everyone was trying to figure out what had happened and I guess they thought I knew something, us being mates and family and all."

Harry picked up on the unspoken accusation that he had left Ron behind but he chose to let it go. He also felt eyes on him and he turned and saw that Charlie was looking at him intently. What Harry didn't know was that while he slept yesterday, Charlie had taken a walk in the field across the street. Even though the ground was dry and hard in the midst of winter the browned grass had been trampled down in four very distinct spots. The patterns were all too familiar and somewhat disturbing as to their size. Charlie had jumped to the logical, for a wizard at least, conclusion that somehow wherever

Harry had gone and whatever it was he did he managed to gain control of a very large dragon and had compelled it to bring him to the Burrow. On the surface he was, of course, completely wrong, but at a deeper level he was entirely right.

After breakfast was finished Hermione and Ron left for the Ministry as did Mr. Weasley. Ginny was due back at Holyhead but she delayed leaving for as long as she could. Charlie also left to go back north. He was nearing the end of his project and needed to get back to it. So Harry sat in the living room with his mum and wife and spoke little.

"Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley said at one point. "I realize you've been through a great deal and you may not want to tell everything but you seem so withdrawn. Are you sure you are alright?"

"No, ma'am. I'm not really sure about anything right now. I think I took care of the bad guys," he said with a lopsided grin, "but there are other things, I just don't know yet," he finished, shaking his head. "I think I need to have a long talk with Professor Dumbledore. Maybe he can help me make sense of it all, or at least some of it."

He looked over at Ginny and said,

"Love, if you need to get back to Holyhead, I think you should go. I'll be fine here. Mum has gotten to be a quite an expert at taking care of me."

"Are you sure, Harry?" Ginny said, her voice clearly showing her uncertainty.

"Yes, of that I am sure," he said.

With that Ginny gathered up her things and with a final hug and kiss she left the house and Disapparated out of the yard. Harry sat in the living room staring into the low fire that burned in the fireplace. The flames danced across the few pieces of wood suggesting patterns and shapes that may or may not have been there.

"Harry, dear. Would you rather be left alone?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

“Not really, no, but I guess I am pretty lousy company.”

“Well, my dear, I don’t know if you’d ever be considered a chatter box but this is unusually quiet for you. It must have been pretty terrible.”

“It’s funny, Mum. As it turned out I wasn’t in all that much danger but the way things happened...” he tailed off and just shrugged. “I’m just not sure what to make of it. I think after another good night’s sleep, I’ll take the trip up to Hogwarts tomorrow and see if there is some way that I can have a private conversation with Professor Dumbledore.”

Mrs. Weasley smiled at Harry and just then the kitchen door swung open and someone walked in.

“’allo Muum, ‘arry,” Fleur said as she moved from the kitchen to the living room.

“Fleur, dear, what a pleasant surprise. What brings you here?” Mrs. Weasley asked although she was fairly sure what the reason was.

As Fleur undid her flowing winter cloak and set down a large carry bag by the couch where Harry was sitting she smiled at her mother-in-law.

“Eet gets lonely at the cottage with Bill at ‘ogwarts so I thought I would pay a visit,” she said to Mrs. Weasley then turned toward Harry. “‘ow you say, budge up there ‘arry so I may seet down,” she said even though there was plenty of empty seats around the living room.

Without seeming to even notice Harry slid over a bit so that Fleur had room to sit next to him without being too close. She opened her bag and pulled out some fabric and a sewing kit.

“I thought I would try my ‘and at makeeng sometheeng for the baby, Muum. I may need your ‘elp though,” Fleur said matter-of-factly.

“Of course, dear, what have you got there?” Mrs. Weasley said.

The two women kept up a running conversation while Harry sat and stared into the fire. Occasional questions were directed to him and he

would turn and reply and then go back to contemplating the fire. But gradually his answers began to take on a more definitive tone as Fleur worked her own special magic and helped draw him out. They convinced him he should have lunch despite the size of the breakfast he had consumed and they were sitting around the table when they heard a knock on the kitchen door. Mrs. Weasley stood up and answered the door. It barely registered on Harry that the voice that asked for permission to enter was a deep bass rumble. He did turn when he heard Mrs. Weasley's voice say,

"Harry, dear. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mr. Grimsson are here to see you."

Harry's head came around quickly and he stood up. He could see that his two superiors were maintaining neutral expressions but their postures radiated concern.

"Sir, is there something wrong?" he asked.

"We thought we'd come and find out for ourselves, Harry. When Arthur told us you were up and about this morning, I suggested to Abernathy that we pop out here. We'd also like to talk to you," the Minister said.

"Yes, sir. Here or in the living room?" Harry asked, still a bit flustered.

"Where would you prefer us, Molly?" the Minister began. "We don't wish to disturb you or Mrs. Weasley here considering her condition," he said.

At the word 'condition' Fleur's eyebrow flew up and she shook her head and said,

"Mon dieu, 'ommes."

"The living room will be just fine, Kingsley," Molly said while giving her daughter-in-law a 'look'.

Harry led the way and indicated that his two bosses should sit where they liked. Harry sat down in the same spot on the couch he had

occupied all morning. The two older men regarded him quietly for a few moments and he calmly waited for them to break the silence.

“So, Harry. How are you? You look no worse for the wear,” the Minister began.

“This time I didn’t take any damage, sir. I can’t say the same for them. I think I took down their leader and his headquarters as well as three more warehouses full of contraband. Before the spells started flying the wizard who I think was the big boss indicated he was doing it to set himself up as a magical dictator. Said something about not hiding from muggle bugs, as he called them, anymore.”

“You did all that in three days, Harry?” Grimsson asked incredulously.

“Actually it seemed like it was in less than one. I’m not sure what happened but I lost two days in there somewhere. I used the portal we found in Knockturn Alley. I think that may have accounted for it.”

“That would explain some of the strange news we’ve been hearing since yesterday morning, Harry. Seems that a large manor house in western Romania was destroyed in a fire as were three large storage facilities in western Ukraine, Poland and Bavaria. The buildings and their contents were a total loss and there appeared to be no survivors or other eye witnesses. I also understand that the barn you raided up in Derbyshire suffered a rather catastrophic roof collapse. In this instance there were witnesses. Some of your people were there just by the portal investigating a tripped alarm spell in that potion shop,” Director Grimsson was saying. “They heard heavy winds both before and after the collapse but by the time they cast light spells all they could see was shattered beams and roofing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And we are to understand that this was all the result of you working alone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All that damage in four widely spaced locations throughout Europe after having successfully fought, I would assume, a rather powerful wizard?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Harry,” the Minister began. “What we have just described has more of the nature of a natural disaster than the fall out of a magical confrontation.”

“Yes, sir I know that. I’m afraid at this point that I can’t reveal any more details. It’s my intention to travel to Hogwarts tomorrow to discuss this in detail with Professor Dumbledore. Until then I think it would be, premature I guess, to discuss it more since I have very little understanding of how things unfolded,” Harry said, knowing he was shading the truth more than a little here, for it was fear and not lack of understanding that was keeping him quiet.

“That sounds like a good idea, Harry. But would I be wrong in thinking that this has some bearing on what you refer to as your anger issues?” Kingsley asked.

“In a manner of speaking but not entirely, sir. I think it only fair to tell you, sirs, that if I can’t find a satisfactory answer to this situation it may require me to resign.”

This certainly took the two men by surprise. Kingsley was the first to recover.

“Harry, we’ve had this discussion before, haven’t we. You consider your youth and inexperience a problem that Abernathy and I don’t see as particularly vexing. There may be those that might take issue with your tactics and the details of the outcome but I don’t think anyone would argue with the need to deal with the problem.”

“With all due respect, sir, and taking into consideration the lack of detail you’re dealing with, you have no idea how much more there is with this particular problem than my age, or temper or any other issue that has cropped up since I took this job. But on the advice of a very wise wizard, I’m not making any decisions until I know more. I just

thought it was fair to warn you and to give you some idea of what we might be facing here.”

“Well, Harry,” the Minister began, “we will give you time to try and find your answers. I trust that you will do us the courtesy of talking to us before you come to any final decisions, yes?”

“Of course, sir.”

“On to more practical matters, Harry,” Director Grimsson said. “We think it would be a good idea if we issued a press release to give some general information about what has happened. Any thoughts on that?”

“Not a bad idea, since we kind of left it hanging about what was behind all that smuggling business. I would suggest you leave it at agents of the department having done whatever it is you’re going to tell them. It will reflect better on the Ministry that way.”

“Alright, Harry, if you prefer,” said Grimsson.

After that they spent some time discussing some of the more mundane issues of the department and what was going on with the Centaurs and Goblins and within half an hour of arriving the Minister and Director were taking their leave of the two Mrs. Weasleys and Harry at the kitchen door. When they were alone again Harry walked up to the two women and put one arm around each and pulled them close for a moment and then released them to return to the living room and resume his contemplation of the fire from the couch. The two observed him for a time and then moved into the living room to take up their watch once more.

The rest of the day and evening passed without incident. Arthur returned from work and they had a quiet dinner. Ginny wasn’t due home until late and Harry chose to sit up until she returned. He didn’t want to spend any time in bed alone. They sat together on the couch for a bit and then went hand in hand up to their room.

The sun had barely risen the next morning and Harry was already dressed and fed and heading outside to start his trip to Hogwarts in

an attempt to find some answers. He appeared in his usual spot in Hogsmeade and made his way up to the castle doors. His knock was answered by an unknown middle aged witch.

“Yes?”

“Um, my name is Harry Potter. I’d like to speak to the Head, please?”

“Oh, yes, of course, Mr. Potter. I’m afraid Mr. Filch has taken ill and I’m filling in for a few days. Please, go right ahead. Breakfast hasn’t started yet so she should be in her office.”

Harry nodded and smiled a bit and hurried up to the second floor and the entrance to the Head’s stairway. Just as he arrived the guardian statue ground sideways to reveal the staircase. Harry walked up and as he stepped onto the outer room floor the door to the office opened.

“Harry, this is unexpected, particularly this early. Is there a problem?” Professor McGonagall asked, obviously concerned.

“Yes, ma’am, I think there is. I need to speak with Professor Dumbledore, if I can.”

“Certainly, Harry, come in.”

Harry walked into the office and immediately looked to his mentor’s portrait.

“Harry. I assume there is some problem?” the Professor said in his quiet voice.

“A very large one, sir. I don’t mean any disrespect to the others but I need to talk to you in private somehow.”

“I am sure the others will not take offense, Harry. Private, hmmm. I suggest you take a walk to the Room of Requirements. I sense that your need is more than sufficient to induce the necessary transformation.”

The Professor gave no indication that he noticed Harry's wince at the word 'transformation'.

"Yes, sir. If you'll excuse me, everyone," Harry said as he hurried back out of the office.

In a short time he had made his way to the door of that most special room in all of Hogwarts. It had proven most helpful in times past but it was never more needed than this morning. He turned the handle and walked into a small comfortable looking room that had one high backed cushioned seat, a small fireplace and most importantly a large portrait frame, currently unoccupied. Harry walked in and stood by the chair looking at the empty frame.

"Um, sir?" Harry said, tentatively.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore said as he moved into view. "My apologies. Some of the, how shall I say, less tractable of my colleagues needed to be soothed a bit. You've become a favorite subject for our discussions and they didn't take it well that I was getting a private audience," he finished with a bit of a smile. "So, please, sit down and explain the situation you find yourself in."

Harry sat down and after taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly began to explain the course of events that brought him to his current state. He watched as Dumbledore's expression went from benign to neutral to somber. When Harry concluded he sat quietly. He had been using the change in expression as a gauge to the severity of his situation. If the usually unflappable wizard looked this distressed Harry figured he was in major trouble.

"I must say, Harry, you encompass more astounding facets of magic than any handful of wizards I could think to name. First, let me assure you that my change in mood should not be considered a barometer for your situation as such. I am merely concerned with how much distress this has caused you on top of everything else. Let me ask you a few questions if I may."

"Of course, sir," Harry replied.

“First, when you had assumed the form of the dragon were you aware and in control of your actions?”

“Yes, sir. Although it felt like my perceptions altered somewhat. When I was like this, you know, human, I considered that old wizard to be a pretty dangerous character. When I was the dragon all I thought was what a puny pathetic creature he was. And lashing out with my tail or using my wings, geez I’m saying ‘my’ like it’s the most natural thing in the world, happened as naturally as reaching with my hand. But it was me thinking it.”

“Very well, Let us examine what was happening in your mind before the transition. What were you thinking and feeling?”

“Um, I was feeling really, really angry and thinking that here was another fool of a wizard thinking his desire for power and glory was sufficient justification to cause so much trouble. And that he was threatening my friends and family. It felt like I was going to explode I was so full of rage.”

“Hmmm, well it would seem, my boy, that your human form was an insufficient vessel to contain all that anger as well as your prodigious strength so you assumed one that was suitable. One could say that you give a whole new meaning to the term ‘towering rage’.

“Sir,” Harry said plaintively.

“My apologies, Harry. I don’t mean to make light of this situation. It is serious but it is by no means dire. From what you say it is apparent that you are an animagus, as was your father. If you had gone weredragon, if there is such a thing, you would have not been in control nor had memory of what you did in that state. I must say I can’t think of how that would occur. I bite from a dragon usually doesn’t leave much that could go were in the future.”

Harry looked at the Professor with the first glimmer of hope he had since returning to the Burrow.

“The question that we need to answer is whether or not you can make the transition at will or was it some response to the extreme

stress. Would you mind if I brought Professor McGonagall into this discussion?" the Professor asked.

"No sir, I'd like to keep it to a minimum but I'm sure I can trust the Headmistress. I guess she'd be at breakfast by now. I can go down and ask her to come up."

"Please do so, Harry. I will await your return."

Harry wrote out a quick message on a page from the small notebook he always had in his robe pocket and then moved quickly from the room and made his way down to the smaller entrance to the side of the Great Hall. He stood in the doorway and motioned to a first year from the Gryffindor table to come to him.

"Y-yes, sir?" the young wizard in training said.

"Would you please take this note up to the Headmistress?"

"S-sir?"

"Don't worry, she doesn't bite," he said with a gentle smile.

Most of the head table was watching the exchange and as the young boy moved to the stairs for the dais he was waved up by the Headmistress. The message was delivered and read and then Professor McGonagall leaned over to her deputy, Professor Sprout, and spoke a few words and then rose and walked to meet Harry.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, ma'am, but Professor Dumbledore thought you could be of help," Harry said.

"I'd be only too happy to help in any way I can, Harry."

They were soon outside the door and when Harry opened it he could see the room had altered slightly to contain another chair. Harry and the Headmistress took their seats and looked up at Dumbledore.

“Well, Minerva,” Dumbledore began. “It seems that Harry presents us with another unique situation to ponder. Apparently during his latest adventure he discovered that he is an animagus.”

“You discovered it, Harry? You generally have to work at it very hard and most that attempt it never acquire the skill.”

“That’s what I understood, ma’am. It just happened.”

Harry proceeded to describe to Professor McGonagall the circumstances around his transformation. By the time he was finished she was regarding him with something close to awe.

“Oh, my,” was all she managed to say at first.

She looked up at her friend and colleague and then back at Harry.

“This is beyond incredible. When it turned out that you were able to perform major conjurations without a wand, Harry, it was astounding but not too terribly difficult to accept since we’ve had previous examples. But this without precedent, at least as far as I know. Do you have any knowledge of something like this, Albus?” she asked by way of conclusion.

“No, Minerva. It is as new to me as it is to you. But based on what Harry has described it certainly rings true of an animagus, unless it is a totally new phenomenon. I believe we need to help Harry discover what it is about this new aspect of himself. Was it merely a one time response to an extraordinary event or some hidden talent waiting to be released? Since you are the most experienced and skilled animagus of which I know I thought perhaps you might be able to guide Harry in this.”

“Well, his father was clever enough to have figured it out,” the Headmistress replied quietly. “Let me ask you a few questions, Harry. Did you consciously wish or hope that something like this would occur?”

“What, like ‘gee, I wish I was a dragon right now’? No, ma’am, I was too busy being really, really angry. I was a little concerned about how strong the old wizard was but that was about all,” Harry said.

“Hmm, emotional stress. In some cases that can be a factor in the transformation but for most it simply gets in the way. Usually, making the change takes significant concentration, especially the first few times. There is of course another issue here. If Harry needs to be angry to make the transformation what you wind up with is an angry dragon and that’s rarely a good thing. On the other hand, having happened once, it would not be inconceivable that this might become a reaction anytime his temper really gets away from him.”

“I dunno, Professor. I was about as angry as I could be when those two tried to kidnap Abigail,” Harry said.

“Think back on it, Harry. I understand there was something different about you then,” Dumbledore said.

“Oh, you mean the eyes?”

“Yes, Harry. Perhaps the anger was working the transformation even then. Perhaps Ginny’s intervention was more timely then first thought.”

Harry shuddered at the thought of what could have happened if he had turned into a massive dragon in the middle of Hogsmeade. He covered his face with his hands and rested his elbows on his thighs. After a few moments of silence he lifted his face from his hands and looked up at the portrait.

“What now, Professor? How much of danger am I to people, my family?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know that you are any danger to them at all, Harry, at least not any more then any other member of a large family is. We need to explore the particulars first. If you remain in control as an animagus does then that greatly lessens any threat. If great anger is required that may simplify it. You would just need to make sure you don’t lose

your temper. But as with any talent you may wish to study it and come to find it has its benefits.”

“Benefits, sir?”

“Well, Harry, it did come in rather handy on your latest expedition, did it not?” Dumbledore asked.

“I guess so. There is going to be a problem though. There aren’t many places where I can practice this. I got the impression I was a pretty big dragon,” Harry said.

“Yes, Harry, that does present a problem. I’m not sure even the Room of Requirements could handle that.”

Professor McGonagall was looking thoughtful. She looked up at Dumbledore and then at Harry.

“Harry, why don’t you and I talk a walk? Let me get my winter cloak and I’ll meet you at the front door.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said.

He could see Dumbledore nod. The late Headmaster then said,

“Rest assured my boy, I will keep your confidence. The others will simply have to understand.”

Harry thought back to some of the conversations he had witnessed and he knew just how ‘understanding’ many of the old Heads could be. He did not envy Dumbledore. He then followed Professor McGonagall out of the room and as she diverted to her office Harry went down to wait by the front door. A few students passed by and greeted Harry and he politely responded but went no further. The Headmistress rejoined him covered in a heavy cloak and gestured for Harry to open the door. He pulled it closed behind him and was required to hurry to catch up the Professor. This was not going to be a leisurely stroll. She definitely had a destination in mind. Soon it was apparent that she was on her way to the Quidditch pitch.

In moments they were at the tunnel that was the main entrance to the pitch. She led Harry a few steps in and then turned and with her wand caused the large doors to swing shut. She then incanted “collaportus” to lock the doors to all but the most determined trespasser. She led Harry out onto the pitch proper, now brown in the winter cold. She stopped when they were in the very center. She turned to face Harry.

“Now, Harry. We need to try a few things and this is the only place I can think of that will keep us out of view. Should you be successful you must remember to remain on the ground. That should keep you hidden, I hope,” she added.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Alright. Now, in order to make the transformation an Animagus must first be able to convince him or herself that the change is possible. Next they must have a need, such as a desire to be able to fly or travel, or in the case of your father and god father, the need to help control Remus Lupin when he went werewolf. In your case it seems you have satisfied both those requirements inadvertently. What we must now explore whether or not you can make the change without the need for immense anger,” she said.

Harry thought for a moment. He knew that Professor Dumbledore surmised that some part of him had determined he needed the great size of the dragon to contain his growing anger as well as his power. He also knew that when he fought the mutated dragon he had expended enormous amounts of energy. But where did it come from? Was it all internal or was it pulled from his surroundings or was it both? Too many questions and not nearly enough answers, he thought.

“Harry, I suggest you try and calm yourself. Whatever you’re thinking about is getting you annoyed. I can feel it from here,” the Headmistress said with some concern.

“I’m sorry, Professor. Do you think it would help for me to picture in my mind what I’m trying to become. Do you do that?”

“Not really, Harry. I don’t need to do that since I know what I’ll become. When I first studied the transformation as part of my advanced Transfiguration work the form of the cat was as much a surprise to me as anyone. But it might be worth a try.”

Obviously Harry had no idea what he had looked like as a dragon except in a most general sense, but maybe that would be enough. He had seen enough dragons before to know what they looked like and he just tried to form a rough sketch without pursuing any of the particulars that differentiated one type of dragon from another. When he had created the picture he then began to think ‘big’. He was trying to convince himself that he needed to grow large enough to contain all his prodigious strength to prevent himself from being damaged. He blinked a couple of times and realized he was looking at the Hogwarts castle from above the stadium walls. He heard his name called from somewhere below him.

“Harry, for Merlin's sake, get down before someone sees you,” the Professor called up to him.

Harry realized he had been sitting back on his rear haunches and his neck was fully extended. He pivoted forward and dropped to all fours with a thud. He swung his head around and could see the diminutive form of the Headmistress from off to one side. She must have moved sideways when Harry changed. He looked at her for a few minutes and thought back as to how the old wizard he had incinerated had looked so small and pathetic. While the Professor simply looked smaller, there was still an aura of strength and determination about her, a being worthy of his respect despite the huge disparity in size. Harry was relieved to know he could make that sort of determination. He shuffled about as best he could in the suddenly tight confines of the pitch and brought his great head down so that he could be more at eye level with the Head.

“Harry, can you understand what I am saying?” she asked, her voiced tinged with awe.

Harry knew that he could never form the words and he was afraid if he even tried he might accidentally incinerate the Head as he had done to the old wizard. He settled for merely nodding.

“My word, this is amazing. Let’s try a few simple things to make sure you have full control, alright, Harry? As best you can try to unfurl your wings. Your wings, good grief.”

Harry carefully let his massive pinions spread and gave a few shallow sweeps, then he folded them along his back.

“Harry, I’m going to move off the pitch. Once I’m out of the way, just try walking around to make sure you have complete control of your body. Then we’ll work on you changing back. I assume you want to change back?”

Harry nodded a bit more vigorously.

“Good,” the Professor said and then she hurried off to take a seat in the lowest row of the grandstand.

Harry proceeded to move about the pitch as best he could, trying not to tear up the turf and leave behind any signs. His tail was giving him some issues as he bounced it off the walls a time or two but since he was moving slowly it didn’t result in any damage. After twenty minutes or so he came to a stop in front of where the Professor sat. He brought his head level and regarded her with his large green eyes. A thought occurred to him and he brought his tail around and he swung his head around to look. His skin was a deep emerald green, in places so deep as to look almost black. He knew he would stand out quite well in daylight but the dark color might make it difficult to see him in the dark. That thought he found particularly interesting. He looked back at the Head again.

“Alright, Harry, let’s see if we can get you back to yourself now. It’s really just a matter of remembering who and what you were originally and putting yourself back in that shape. Give it a try.”

Harry thought briefly about himself and once more after a couple of heartbeats he found his visual perspective changed. He now had to look up from the pitch grass to see the Professor looking down at him from the grandstand railing. He didn’t feel the extreme fatigue he had previously but he figured that had more to do with all he had done as

a dragon and perhaps the effect of the time dislocation. Now that was something he could discuss with the other Heads. While he was considering this the Professor was making her way back down to the pitch. She came to stand in front of him.

“How are you, Harry?”

“Pretty good, all things considered. It’s a relief to know I have some control over this thing. Although I don’t think I’m ready to experiment with the anger side of it. I wouldn’t want to burn down the stadium by accident,” he said with a bit of grin.

“I must say I agree with that, Harry. Any other effects? Fatigue, disorientation, strange thoughts?”

“No, ma’am. Could make for some interesting dreams though. There is something else about what happened when I was gone that I think I can safely discuss with everyone in your office. It has to do with the portal and they all know about that anyway.”

“Certainly, Harry. Let’s head back up there and get out of the cold.”

Harry smiled and they turned to walk back to the portal. Uncharacteristically, the Professor hooked Harry’s arm with her own as they walked side by side. Apparently, she was just as relieved as he was. The walk back was at a more leisurely pace and their first stop was the Room of Requirements which when opened retained the configuration with two chairs. The frame was empty. Professor McGonagall stepped up and tapped it and said,

“Albus, I say, are you there?”

“One moment, Minerva,” came the voice from just beyond one side of the empty portrait.

Dumbledore moved back into the center of the portrait and looked down at Harry and the Head.

“Good news, I hope?”

“So far, so good, Albus. He transformed at will on the first try and while he couldn’t speak he could understand me. It appears he has full control as well. Although it was pretty tight in the stadium. He’s by far the largest dragon I’ve ever seen, although my experience is rather limited. His return was no issue either. I think we can safely say Mr. Potter is a full fledged animagus.”

“Sir, does this mean I have to register now. Won’t that make it a matter of public record.”

“Yes, Harry, that’s what the law says and that’s what the result would be. However, I would suggest in your case that you not rush to any such action. There are likely to be consequences that might not be all that pleasant. For you or your family. The memory of Voldemort and his reptilian alter ego are still rather fresh in the mind of the public. You may certainly trust us to hold your secret Harry. As to others, you must make that choice but I think the only one at the Ministry would be Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

“Alright, sir, I’ll keep that in mind. There is something else about my trip that I would like to discuss but I think we can do that with the others. It involves the portal.”

“Excellent, Harry. That would go a long way to assuage the delicate egos on the wall. My earlier reference to grumpy old witches and wizards is still apt,” the Headmaster said with an impish grin.

“Yes, sir. We’ll be right there,” Harry said.

He and the Headmistress left the room and made their way back to the Heads office. In a few moments Harry was standing in the middle of the office looking at the various portraits who were in turn examining him with a variety of expressions.

“Ladies and gentlemen, first of all I would like to apologize for my behavior earlier. I meant no disrespect but the situation was such that I felt I needed to speak only to Professor Dumbledore. Based on what we discussed and discovered he feels I should keep part of what we discussed close hold for the time being,” the last being accompanied

by a 'harumph' or two, "but there is something that I'd like to discuss with all of you and ask your help with."

Harry could see that most of the portraits seemed to change their attitudes and brightened a bit.

"As you recall I once asked for your help regarding the Spatial Distortion Portal," Harry said, directing his attention towards the elderly wizard that helped identify it. "I used the Portal to travel to a place in western Romania."

"Excuse me, young man. I was under the impression that the portal had outlets in Knockturn Alley and in a barn in Derbyshire. How ever did you find yourself in Romania?"

This was said by the same wizard. Harry craned his neck back to look at him more directly.

"Yes, sir. The portal does have the two outlets as before. I turned right when I was between the portals and that's how I found my way to the big stone house in Romania. The only thing is I seemed to have lost two days while I was at it."

"Most extraordinary, young man. To my knowledge, little as it might be, to move off the straight line between the two portals would result in endless wandering until you died of thirst or hunger. However did you manage it?" the former Head asked.

"I guess you could call it a sixth sense, sir. I knew there had to be an outlet somewhere and if I close my eyes sometimes I can see things I'm looking for. I just followed the image. What I don't understand is the time loss."

"Nor do I, young man," the portrait admitted.

"Over here, young man," a raspy female voice called to him.

Harry turned and took a few steps to where a middle aged witch regarded him from behind large thick lensed glasses. The voice did not fit the image at all.

"Yes, I know," she rasped. "I used to smoke a pipe almost continuously while I was alive and it rather did me in at the end. Anyway, I was the Head here around the turn of the century when all those muggle scientists were running around congratulating themselves on discovering the 'nature of the universe' as they called it. One particularly brainy fellow deduced that time and space were one and the same, part of the same phenomenon. We could have told them that centuries ago. I would imagine that any device that allowed you to move across so much space would have to have had an effect on the time spent doing it. Would you be able to estimate the distance you actually walked?"

"Well, ma'am, I wasn't all that tired at the end of the walk so I'd have to think maybe just a few hours, say eight or ten actual miles," Harry said.

"Hmm, so you traded time for distance. Was there ever a noticeable difference in time shift when you traveled from the store to the barn and back?" she rasped out.

"Not that anyone has ever mentioned, ma'am."

"Is the portal still intact?"

"I think it is, ma'am," Harry replied.

"I would propose an experiment. Obtain two very accurate timepieces. Synchronize them at Knockturn Alley, then have one Disapparated to the barn and the other carried through the portal and then compared. You must make sure that they are set down to the exact second."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll look into that. Thank you."

"Not at all, Mr. Potter. Things haven't been this interesting around here in many years," the portrait rasped.

"Well, Harry, are you feeling any better?" Professor Dumbledore asked.

“Quite a bit, sir. I still think there are some challenges to be faced but I’m better equipped to face them now. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You are more than welcome, my boy. I think the ledger sheet is still tipped well in your favor but I’m pleased we’ve been able to help. What now?”

“A quick visit with Abigail and then back to the Burrow. It must be about lunch time so with your leave I’ll head down the Great Hall,” Harry replied.

“Certainly, Harry, off you go,” Professor McGonagall said.

Harry walked into the anteroom and before the door swung shut he could hear the beginning of a very spirited discussion. He made his way to the entrance to the Great Hall and could see that lunch hadn’t begun yet so he stood to the side and waited. In less than a quarter hour students began to arrive and as they passed they offered Harry polite ‘hello’s. Then Harry heard that airy voice.

“Sir, oh sir, it’s good to see you.”

“Hello, Abigail. It’s good to be seen by you. Can I speak to you for a bit before you eat?”

“Absolutely.”

Harry led Abigail over to a quiet corner and he knelt down on one knee so he could look her in the eye.

“Abigail. I know you saw something the other morning when I came home. I understand most of what’s going on now. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall helped me out a great deal. I’m going to let the rest of the family in on the secret tonight but I wanted to make sure you understood before I left,” he said, looking around to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard. “I’m an animagus, Abigail. I didn’t know I could do it until it happened but I turn into a pretty big dragon.”

"I know about the dragon part, Harry. I saw that when you came home. I had a hint probably around the time it actually happened. I guess being an animagus means you can control it . I wasn't sure about that when you came home," she said breathlessly.

"Yes, little one. I can control it. Professor McGonagall and I did some experimenting this morning. I wanted to make sure you knew and that there was no need to be afraid."

Abigail looked at him, her big dark eyes looking at his green ones. She reached out and gave Harry a fierce hug around the neck.

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered into his ear. "I wasn't afraid of you, I was afraid for you. I'm happy it's not so bad. I'm sure the Weasleys will feel the same when you tell them," she said as she let him go.

"You're probably right. Oh, and I need you to take a note to Professor Weasley," Harry said as he pulled out his notebook and pencil stub.

The note asked Bill to come to the Burrow and bring Fleur if she wasn't already there. He did not give details but made sure he stressed how important it was. He handed the note to Abigail and then leaned in to kiss her cheek and then watched as she hurried into the Great Hall and directly up to the head table. He stood and watched as Bill unfolded the note and read it. Bill looked up and toward the door and seeing Harry he nodded. Harry did likewise and with a wave he turned and headed for the front door and Hogsmeade. In less than ten minutes he was back at the Burrow.

"Harry, dear. It's so good to see you again. Were they able to help you?" Mrs. Weasley said.

"Yes, ma'am. A great deal in fact," Harry said seriously. "I think I understand things better now and I can tell the family about it but all together, tonight. I need to get everyone here, but I think we need to leave Eleanor and Audrey out of it for now. I know what you're hoping but this needs to be a strict secret for the time being."

"I understand, Harry. Let's work on getting everyone here. Can you send Kreacher to the Ministry? That would take care of Arthur, Percy, Ron and Hermione."

"Yes, ma'am. I already let Bill know so that takes care of him and Fleur. Is Ginny due back today?"

"Yes, Harry, she just had a practice today and said she would be back before dinner."

"Good, that leaves Charlie, George and Angelina," Harry replied.

"Leave George and Angelina to me. Let's see where Charlie is. Hmm," she said looking at the clock that told where the family was. "He's matched with Ginny. He must be in Holyhead."

Harry and his mum looked at each other and smiled a bit.

"I'll have Kreacher go after him as well," Harry said.

They quickly wrote out notes and Harry called for Kreacher. In moments the little elf popped out of sight with notes in hand. Mrs. Weasley kissed Harry on the cheek and then left with a pop. Harry sat down at the table and munched on a biscuit that was on a tray on the table. He realized he was very hungry and began to scrounge around the kitchen and by the time he was done he had eaten quite a bit. It was about an hour later when Mrs. Weasley came in through the kitchen door.

"Well, now we just wait, Harry. I see you had some lunch, good. Let's sit in the living room and relax."

Harry followed in and took the same seat he had occupied the day before. The fire was still going and he began to examine the flames. He had to smile a bit at the thought of him experimenting with his incendiary talents. The warmth and patterns of the flames lulled Harry into a doze and he slept for a while until he heard the door slam.

"Harry!" Ginny called out as she dashed through the kitchen.

He just managed to stand up in time to meet her rush. She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. He held on to her just as hard.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" she said as she lifted her head and tilted it back to look at him.

"Better than yesterday, and certainly better than the day before. Once everyone gets here I'll explain it all, as best I can."

"Alright, sweetheart. I can wait that long, I think," she said and then took his hand and they sat together on the couch.

Over the next hour, various family members arrived and Harry had to repeat to one degree or another the same thing he told Ginny regarding his welfare. Bill and Fleur were the last to arrive. Fleur walked up and gave Harry a thorough once over as he sat there and then placed a perfunctory kiss on his cheek. Once everyone was seated Harry stood up and moved to stand near the fireplace. He looked down into the flames for a moment and then turned and looked at everyone.

"I'm going to tell you everything I can about what happened while I was gone. I have to ask you to keep what I tell you in strictest confidence. You'll understand I think when you hear it all."

He took a deep breath and began to explain. Everything, starting with the brief flash of a vision Christmas day to the much longer one in his study. He told them about how Abigail was able to read him and give him enough information to make the trip using the portal. He also talked about what the former Headmistress said about the idea that portal distorted time as well as space. Then he stopped and looked at them a moment.

"Well, I guess that would account for your being gone for longer than you thought but it still leaves a few questions about how you managed all that destruction Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "The word is that four fairly large buildings were completely destroyed and you yourself said the old wizard was pretty strong. I'd think even you would have trouble doing all that in just a few hours as you said."

"You're right, Dad. The fact is I couldn't have done all that in that amount of time. But it was me, in a way. I think the best way for you to understand is for me to show you. But we need to go outside. I suggest you all get your cloaks on."

Harry got a number of odd looks but they knew him well enough to know he wouldn't be trying to pull any kind of a gag so they collected up their outerwear and followed Harry through the front door.

"I think it would be best if you all just stayed here behind the wall. I need to go across the road to the field."

"Harry, what is all this?" Ginny said with some exasperation.

"Please, Ginny, just be patient a couple of minutes more," he said as he moved further out into the field.

The sun had already set and the light was quickly dimming. He judged he was a safe distance away so he turned around and looked at his family arrayed before him across the road. He turned his thoughts inward and thought about needing to be 'big' like he did at the Stadium and as before within two heartbeats he was looking down at them as they looked up at him, wide eyed and openmouthed. Mrs. Weasley was leaning back against her husband for support. What they saw was a magnificent and massive dark skinned dragon sitting back on its haunches, its forelegs drawn up along its massive chest. The long tapered tail struck straight out behind for balance, the wings folded along its back.

Harry had resolved to be as nonthreatening as he could be so he dropped down to his forelegs with a thump. He took two steps forward and then crouched down so that his body rested on the winter browned grass. He lowered his head so that it hovered just above the dirt of the road. Everyone was looking at him in awe and amazement. He noticed that Charlie, perhaps accustomed to being around dragons began to move sideways as if to get a better view in the fading light. Harry straightened out his tail and spread his wings to give his brother in law a complete picture. He noticed that Charlie

was smiling a bit. He shifted his attention back to Ginny. He was thankful that he didn't see any fear, just shock and amazement.

She came through the opening of the wall for the path that led to the front door. She walked to within an arms length of his snout. She looked into his big green eyes, with the vertical pupils and said,

"Harry, it is you in there isn't it?"

Harry nodded.

"You can understand me but you can't talk?"

He nodded again.

"Oh my," was all she could say and then she reached out to touch the end of his snout but couldn't bring herself to go the last few inches.

Harry gave a bit of a snort and moved his head forward to touch her hand. Her eyes went wide and then she smiled and said,

"Ohh, it's so soft and warm, just like your real, I mean, like...oh dear," and then she blushed and laughed a bit as Harry winked with one of those big green eyes.

He let his eyes drift across the others, stopping to look directly at each of them as if to assure them that he was still Harry. Then he decided he had most likely made his point and so he stood and stepped back and then thought 'Harry' and in two heart beats he was looking at them from his normal height. He started to walk forward and made it to the edge of the road before he was met by Ginny and one of her full speed hugs.

"Oh, Harry, that was incredible. I never imagined such a thing," she said as they held each other firmly.

Harry then took his arms from around her and took hold of one of her hands and led her across the road to the rest. The all drew in closer as he reached the path opening.

“That was what happened in the manor house. The rage had built so big I couldn’t contain it as I am so I got bigger. After that the rest was easy. I landed out in the field and changed before Abigail made it out the front door. But she knew, at least the dragon part, but I asked her to keep it secret. I explained it to her before I came home this afternoon. So that’s the secret. I’m an unregistered animagus. It needs to stay a secret for now, maybe forever, I don’t know. The way things are I can’t imagine people would be too thrilled to find out what I can become. Enough of them are afraid of me as it is,” he concluded.

No one was saying anything. They just stood and stared at him. He gave one of his usually crooked smiles and said,

“Maybe we should go back inside, it’s kinda cold out here and I don’t think anyone wants me to try and warm things up,” and he laughed.

This seemed to break the spell and everyone began to laugh as well and they came up and hugged Harry or shook his hand or both and they went inside for a quick dinner and a long evening of discussion.

Harry's Future, Part 23

It was very possibly the most extraordinary evening any of them had ever spent. It certainly was one for the books as far as Harry was concerned. He sat amongst his family in the large living room that was the result of his Christmas largess several years earlier. This night it was serving as the center of discussion about the latest revelation of the seemingly unending store of uniqueness that was Harry Potter. He sat with his wife firmly pressed up against his side, his right hand tightly held in both of hers. All of his red headed 'brothers' were there, as were his adoptive parents. Fleur and Hermione also sat nearby. Only a short time before Harry had revealed the incredible news that he was an animagus, a rarity by magical standards, but what was even more astounding was that he took the form of a very large dragon.

"I dunno, mate, I'm still having a bit of a hard time getting my head around this," Ron said.

"I can understand that, Ron. I'm not sure I've got my head around it either," Harry said quietly.

Harry let his gaze roam around the room trying to gauge how his family was reacting as the idea was sinking in. As he could imagine, Charlie seemed to be taking a particular interest but hadn't been saying much. Their eyes met and Harry looked at him with raised eyebrows and said,

"No, Charlie."

Charlie shook his head and then looked at him and said,

"No 'what', Harry."

"You can't have any samples," he replied straight faced.

Charlie's eyes went wide and then he started laughing and everyone else joined in.

“Well, son, I’m glad to see you’re keeping a sense of humor about this. We’re here to help you any way we can although I can’t for the life of me think of what we could do,” Mr. Weasley said.

“Well, I think we’re off to a good start. No one running away screaming was a big help and sitting here talking to me is, too. Most important will be not letting anyone else know. I guess it’s unfair to drop this on you but I just don’t see a way around it.”

“We’ll make it work, Harry, don’t you worry,” Mrs. Weasley added.

Harry then looked at Charlie and Percy.

“I guess it’s more of a problem for you guys, but I just don’t know Audrey and Eleanor that well yet. I’m going to have to rely on you to determine if and when they should be told.”

They both just nodded. Hermione had said little but had been regarding Harry intently. He had the idea that she was approaching the problem from her usual thorough analytical perspective. Fleur simply watched him. He imagined at sometime not too far in the future they would be having a private heart to heart. He had been afraid that the shock might have been an issue considering her pregnancy but she was probably the last one he really had to worry about.

“Now I just have to figure out what I’m going to do about work,” Harry said.

“What’s the issue, Harry?” Bill asked.

“By not registering I’m going to be breaking the law, Bill. That doesn’t exactly fit in with my being the head of magical law enforcement now does it?”

“Let me ask you a question, Harry,” Bill replied. “Do you know of anyone that is better suited to do what needs to be done with your department?”

“Personally, no, but I imagine if they looked they could find someone,” Harry said.

Ginny’s grip on her husband’s hand tightened and he could see the look Fleur was giving him. So with a sigh he said,

“Alright, for the sake of argument, no, there is no one better able to do what I can do.”

“Ok, now, if you feel confident that you can control this thing what danger do you pose to the public?” Bill continued.

“But that’s the issue, Bill; I don’t know if I have this completely under control. It’s only been a few days and yes I can do it when I want. But I don’t know if it can be triggered some other way. Is there some point where my temper will trigger it automatically? That’s what I need to know.”

“I understand, Harry. I’ll help in any way I can, although this is more Charlie’s area of expertise,” Bill said.

“Ah, well, hold on a minute there, big brother. Yes, dragons are my area of study but it has more to do with things like illnesses and mating habits and so on. Animagi are a bit out my league, but if he needs his talons sharpened I could lend a hand,” Charlie said with a smile and he got a scowl from his mother.

“Charlie, this is serious,” she admonished him.

“No, Mum, it’s ok. Like Dad said we do need to keep a sense of humor about this.”

This did little to mollify his Mum. Hermione chose this moment to speak for the first time since they came back into the house. She started with a question directed at Charlie.

“Charlie, are dragons very territorial?”

"In a word, yes. With the exception of mating and a mother with a clutch of new borns they are very solitary creatures and they guard their territory jealously."

"How are they about their young?"

"Protective you mean? Well Harry can attest to how a mother will protect its eggs. Once the eggs hatch they remain protective for about a year or so. By then the yearlings are big enough to fend for themselves."

"I wonder then if that mutated dragon attacked Harry because it was defending its territory from another dragon, Harry. And maybe Harry's attitude about his family, the raging anger at threats to us is a manifestation of the dragon within. It might have been there all along."

"But from where, how?" Harry asked. "Even the whole horcrux thing only made me a Parseltongue and that went away when the horcrux did."

"I don't know, Harry," Hermione replied. "Why is Professor McGonagall a cat, or your dad a stag? Peter Pettigrew being a rat made a certain sense but it's still a very murky area of magic."

"arry," Fleur said.

"Yes, Fleur?"

"Do you remember thee conversation we 'ad that afternoon at Beauxbaton?"

"Yes, I'm not likely to ever forget that." Harry said with a grin.

"Eet ees still true, 'arry. Thee dragon ees just a changed body. Eef you grow old and gain feefty pounds eet weell steel be you. I know you are concerned. You would not be you eef you weren't. Theenk what Riddle would 'ave done eef 'e 'ad thees power. Try to understand eet but do not worry. You weel find a way to turn eet to thee good."

Harry looked at her for a few moments and nodded. He then figured they had discussed enough for one evening

"I guess we've talked about this enough for one night. Thank you for coming on such short notice and being so understanding. With support like this I should be able to get a handle on it in time. Oh, and Hermione," he said.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Once the weather warms up, maybe we can go somewhere quiet and I'll take you for a ride."

Hermione's eyes went wide and then narrowed as everyone else started laughing. Her dislike for flying witch style was well known. She threw a small pillow at him and then laughed herself. There were a number of hugs and handshakes as everyone prepared to go their separate ways. Harry and Ginny headed back to the London house and as always found Kreacher waiting for them.

"Welcome home, Master Harry, Mistress Ginny. Master Harry feels well?"

"I'm feeling much better, thanks, Kreacher. And thank you for all the help with the messages earlier."

"Kreacher is pleased to be of assistance at any time. Kreacher has word for Master Harry from the Hogwarts elves. They say to tell Master Harry that no one will know of his time at the Quidditch Stadium. They say to tell Master Harry that they have taken care of the grass."

"Oh wow, that's right. I must have left a lot of tracks in the dead grass. I'll have to pay a visit to the kitchen the next time I'm up there," Harry said as he and Ginny started to make their way to their room.

"That would be nice, but do you see, Harry? You have people of all sorts willing to help you."

He smiled at her. In a short time they were snuggled up in bed and Harry was feeling definitely tired. He would have to go in tomorrow and try to meet with the Minister. As Ginny shifted to get comfortable she quietly said,

“Harry?”

“Yes, Gin?”

“I was just thinking. Do you think it’s possible that you might have a dream about something that could make you turn into the dragon?”

“I dunno, love. That’s one of the things I need to try and find out. Why?”

“I guess I’m just a little concerned that I might wake up in the basement because some bloody great dragon crashed through the floors.”

This comment was followed by a snicker which prompted a retaliatory tickle blitz that filled the house with the sound of Ginny’s screams and laughter. The following morning Harry and Ginny were up early and while they were eating breakfast they discussed what Harry was hoping to accomplish for the day.

“Do you think you’ll be able to get in to see the Minister, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“If he’s in today I’d think so. He and the Director were both pretty concerned about what was going on, especially after I mentioned I might have to resign. So if he’s anywhere in the building I should be able to get some time with him.”

“Do you think it will come to that, Harry? That you’ll have to quit?” she asked, her voice full of concern.

“I don’t know, love. I just can’t see a way around violating the registration law and being the head of enforcement. But don’t worry. Even if I had to quit we’d be ok. I have more than enough to take care of us.”

"I'm not worried about the money, Harry. It would just be so unfair. Unfair to the rest of us not to have you doing the work and unfair to you to waste so much talent over a technicality."

Harry just gave her a little smile but suppressed the shrug that always annoyed her so much. Soon enough they were on their separate ways and Harry found himself in the lobby of the Ministry. It was still a little before most of the employees reported so Harry was able to make his way to his office to check for any messages. There were none. He guessed that no one expected him back in yet. Harry wondered to himself just how many days he had been out of the office since he started here.

Finding no message he made his way up the Minister's office suite and approached the secretary's desk. It looked like she had just gotten in. When she looked up her eyes went wide.

"Oh, Mr. Potter, we weren't expecting you so early. The Minister left a standing order that you were to be admitted at anytime as long as he wasn't already with someone. Please, go right ahead."

That was more than the secretary had ever said to Harry before, combined. He approached the door and knocked.

"Yes?" he heard the deep voice call back.

"Harry Potter here, sir."

"Harry! Do come in."

Harry swung the door open and entered the large office. The Minister rose from his chair and met Harry half way, shaking his hand.

"Please, Harry, have a seat. Have you seen Grimsson yet this morning?"

"No, sir. It was advised that I come directly to see you, sir. And only you."

“Advised? By whom, Harry?” the Minister asked as he resumed his seat behind the large desk.

“By Professor Dumbledore, sir.”

“Ah, well, advice worth listening to then. Alright Harry let’s you and I talk. Were you able to come to some conclusions at Hogwarts?” the Minister asked.

“Yes, sir. Before I go on, sir, I need your assurance that you will keep what I tell you in strictest confidence. Professor Dumbledore suggested you were the only one in the Ministry, besides my family, that I could trust with this.”

“Well, that puts me a bit of a tight spot but I don’t think Dumbledore would suggest something that I would come to regret so I’ll agree to that,” the Minister said.

“Thank you, sir. Well, I went up to Hogwarts looking for answers and this is what I found out. I am an animagus. Apparently a natural born or spontaneous one. The bigger issue, if you’ll pardon the pun, is that my other form is a fairly large dragon,” Harry said rather matter-of-factly and then he waited for his superior’s response.

It was a few moments in coming.

“So what you’re telling me is that at some point in your confrontation with this wizard you abruptly turned into a dragon and in that form you laid waste to four buildings in four different countries and then partially demolished that barn in Derbyshire.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Just like that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’re sure it’s animagic that we are dealing with here?”

“As far as we can tell, sir. Professor McGonagall and I did some, well, try outs I’d guess you’d say and I was in complete control and able to understand her completely. Then last night I showed my family and the same thing. The change to and from was controlled and I was able to understand and communicate.”

“You talked?”

“No, sir. Head nods, that sort of thing.”

“Just how big are we talking here, Harry?”

“Well, we didn’t exactly measure but up at school we were in the Quidditch Stadium and I had to be really careful moving around. It was kinda tight. Charlie was there last night and he could probably give a more accurate estimate,” Harry replied.

“Well, this certainly goes well beyond anything Abernathy and I had speculated about. We thought you might have gone berserk or something and used your Firebolt to cover all that distance. I can certainly understand your concern about keeping this confidential.”

“Yes, sir and that brings me to the second issue. Since the animagi registry is public knowledge I can’t see myself complying and if that’s the case my position as the chief of law enforcement becomes a problem,” Harry said.

The Minister looked at Harry and then stood up and walked around the desk and took the other chair that was there for visitors and sat down directly across from his young subordinate.

“Harry. I appreciate your sentiments in this. I can also understand and agree with your reluctance to make this public knowledge. As to how it would affect your being chief I can’t say I’m surprised at how you feel about this. In fact, knowing you as I do I would be surprised if you hadn’t said what you did. But let me ask you something, Harry. Do you think that the things that you did at Hogwarts while you were a student were intended to do good?”

“Sure, I guess so, sir. The Sorcerer’s Stone, the Chamber of Secrets, all that stuff was. Flying the Anglia might not have been done with the best of intentions. Ron and I were trying to save our own skins with that one,” Harry said with a half grin.

“And of course while you were doing these things you never broke any rules or got into trouble, right?”

“Um, well, Ron and I managed to break quite a few rules, sir. After the Chamber of Secrets business Professor Dumbledore told us we had broken at least a dozen rules. And Professor Snape wanted us expelled for crashing the Anglia into the Whomping Willow,” Harry answered.

“But you weren’t, were you?”

“Well, no sir. You know that.”

“Yes, I do know that, Harry. And I know you know it, too. But I want you to understand why you weren’t expelled. I have it on very good authority, Harry, that with the exception of your last year you routinely engaged in behavior that would best be described as, oh, I don’t know, felonious perhaps. And yet you graduated with high honors and great acclaim. Why was that?”

“Um, because we, Ron, Hermione and me that is, were trying to do things to stop Voldemort,” Harry said.

“That’s right, Harry. Now I’m not trying to say that the ends justify the means because it is possible to go too far even when you’re trying to do the right thing, but in your case, it was decided that your infractions were to be overlooked because you were working for a greater good. That’s what I’m saying now. I am prepared to overlook that fact that you are an unregistered animagus because one, your work is too important to us and two I don’t believe that you represent a threat to our world. Now, if we find for some reason the second part changes we’ll deal with it as we have to but for now we keep this in strictest confidence and you keep doing what you’re doing. I assume that your family members here at the Ministry are interested in helping you, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fine, I will speak to them individually and inform them of my intentions here and swear them to strictest secrecy. I will also talk to Abernathy and assure him I am aware of the details but for now they have to remain in confidence. So unless you have any other earth shaking revelations to make, why don’t we get back to work? That is if you feel up to it.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll do that. Thank you, sir. I may need to take some trips up to Hogwarts to work with Professor McGonagall to investigate the extent of this,” Harry said.

“That’s fine, Harry. You can always tie it in to your work with the school and the Centaurs. That will keep it official.”

“Yes, sir.”

They stood up and with a final handshake, Harry left the Ministers office. Harry was relieved that he wasn’t going to have to make any hasty decisions regarding his career but he was still concerned about the issue of fully understanding the extent of this new ability. He wasn’t likely to consider it a gift. He made it to his office and was seated for perhaps ten minutes when there was a tentative knock on the door frame.

“Sir?”

“Tom, come on in. Good timing,” Harry said.

“We weren’t expecting you this morning,” Tom said tentatively.

“So I’ve been told. But I’m here so let’s see what we can get done. I’ll need to see Maxwell and Milligan as soon as possible. Please arrange that for me. I’ll also need to talk with Ms. Granger so if you would check and see if she has some time to spare.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else?”

“Oh, I’m sure there will be all kinds of things but for now that will be enough to get started.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Tom and he hurried off.

A quarter of an hour later both Milligan and Maxwell appeared at his door. Harry waved them in.

“Good morning, gentleman. I want to fill you in on recent events. At least as much as I can.”

“That would be appreciated, sir. Quite frankly the stories have been pretty fantastic,” Maxwell said.

Harry thought to himself that the stories were probably a lot more mundane than the reality.

“So I’ve been told, but here’s what we’ve got. Over the Christmas holiday I started getting flashes of some shadowy figure. It was a concern since back in the days when I was still linked with Riddle I had similar occurrences. So I had Abigail Westwood have a look and she was able to determine the source of these sendings. It involved the portal but not the direct link. Because of the uncertainties and the, well, personal nature I decided to go it alone.”

Harry saw the looks of disapproval from the two older men.

“Yes, I know. I broke all my rules about unauthorized missions and so on. But I thought the risks were too great to a larger party. Call it a command decision. The sender turned out to be a very old, very powerful wizard who was using the smuggling as a way to further his goal to take over the magical world in Europe and possibly even the mundane world as well. When I encountered him the discussion got heated and the results were rather dramatic, explosive you might say. I was also able to tune into the link the portals made to the other storage sites on the continent. They’ve been eliminated. Then I came home.”

Harry sat back, having told all he really intended. He waited for them to ask the first question. Milligan went first.

“Uh, all of that by yourself in a few days, sir?”

“That’s correct.”

“Based on the intelligence we’ve managed to gather that manor and those three warehouses were completely demolished and burned to the ground.”

“I’m aware of that, yes,” Harry replied evenly.

Milligan blinked a time or two and then settled back in his chair.

“So, do we conclude that this investigation is closed?” Maxwell asked.

“No, not yet. I’d like you to make contact with our French friends and see what they are picking up. I’d like to see if we can determine what the extent was, was there any connection directly back to Durmstrang and just who this old wizard was. We may have destroyed a lot of it, but I’m not convinced we’ve gotten rid of all of it. He may have had lieutenants that would be able to step in and keep going,” Harry said.

“We’, sir?” Maxwell asked.

“Yes, we. The Minister will be issuing a press release providing generalized information that will credit agents of the Ministry’s Law Enforcement section for the action resulting in the destruction of the criminal assets.”

“Why do I have a feeling that that was your idea, sir?”

“Because you have very good instincts, Maxwell. I have enough people looking at me with funny looks. I’ve been the famous Harry Potter for far longer than I’d like. It’s better this way. Oh, by the way. Is there still outside access to the portal in Derbyshire?” Harry asked.

“Yes, sir. The roof collapse makes it more difficult but we can still reach it from that side.”

“Good, we are going to be teaming with some researchers from Hogwarts to try and determine some of the aspects of the portals,” Harry said.

“Hogwarts? Shouldn’t that be something the spooks would take care of?” Milligan asked.

“They might think so but I have other ideas. Think of it as part of the growing relationship between the school and the Ministry per the Minister’s wishes. The problem with the spooks is they want to find things out and then keep them to themselves. In fact, Milligan, if you can, I’d appreciate anything you can find out about that dragon I tangled with. Charlie Weasley had very little time to find anything out. Unofficially, of course.”

“Anything you say, chief.”

“Ok. What else do we have?” Harry asked.

The three spent the next hour and a half discussing routine matters of schedules, training, staffing and incidents. By the time Harry was feeling the need to eat they were done and he decided he would take a stroll to the Cauldron and then take a turn around the Alley and stop in and see a few people.

He Disapparated to the courtyard behind the Cauldron and stepped in through the rear door. He stood there a moment and let his eyes adjust to the dimmer light and he could see the dining room was busy but there was space. Apparently the proprietress was alert because as he took a step further into the room she hailed him.

“Harry, it’s so great to see you. How have you been?” Hannah called out.

“I’m doing fine, Hannah. I thought I’d treat myself to a nice lunch today.”

Hannah came up and hugged Harry and then took his arm and led him to a seat at an empty table. He sat down and so did she.

“We haven’t seen much of you since the wedding, Harry.”

“I know, Hannah. Things have been kind of busy and I haven’t been getting out much. How is business?” he asked.

“We’re doing well, Harry. Business has been steadily improving as things have been getting back to normal. People seem happier and more likely to come out of an evening. We aren’t having any trouble making the loan payments,” she said with a little grin.

“That’s not what I meant, Hannah,” Harry said.

“I know, Harry, but I thought I’d tease you a little. It’s fun to see you get so serious,” she said with a laugh.

“How’s Nev doing?” Harry asked.

“He’s doing really well, Harry. He’s been working on a project with Professor Sprout and a couple of the healers as St. Mungo’s. Something about medicinal properties of some of the new plants he’s discovered during his field trips. There’s also some talk about looking for a Ministry grant. They need some funds to refurbish one of the hothouses up at Hogwarts to grow some of the more unusual plants.”

“Sounds really great, Hannah. Looks like our Nev is going to make his mark on the world,” Harry said while he pondered the idea of funds.

“It sure does. Now, what can we get for you for lunch, Harry?” she said with a smile.

Harry spent an enjoyable time eating and talking with Hannah. Considering the events of the previous few days he was feeling a lot better than he thought was possible. After settling his bill he bid Hannah good bye and headed for the entrance to the Alley. Despite the winter chill there were still a fair number of witches and wizards going about their business, some with small children in tow. A number of them recognized Harry and offered greetings of various kinds. Harry smiled or waved and said hello to those nearby. He kept his eyes moving and picked up the Patrollers that were walking the

beat. Harry hadn't realized that they were on their own now. He needed to talk to Maxwell about it. There were details slipping past him and he wasn't happy about that.

He made his way to the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes shop and stepped inside. There were a couple of customers and George was behind the counter.

"Harry! Great to see you today. How are you doing?" George asked.

"Doing good, George. All things considered, better than good."

"Come on back and we can talk in my office. Diggs-worthy, watch the shop."

"Yes, Mr. Weasley," the clerk said, keeping his eyes diverted from Harry.

Harry joined George behind the counter and they went back to George's small office.

"So, Harry. I assume you met with the Minister this morning. How did it go?"

"It actually went fairly well. He was pretty stunned by the news but once he got over that he was pretty good about the whole thing. When I talked about how being unregistered might make my being chief a problem, he said he wasn't going to let that happen. He pointed out that I had broken the rules at school any number of times but Dumbledore and McGonagall let it slide because I was trying to do something good. He said what I was doing was too important to let this ruin it. Just so long as I don't prove a danger to the public," Harry finished.

"That's terrific, Harry. Mum and Dad will be really happy. And I think I'll take some credit for this, too. With what Fred and I used to pull the stuff you and Ron got up to paled by comparison," George said with a laugh.

Harry laughed, too. They chatted for a while longer and then Harry got up and after shaking hands with George he left the shop. His next stop was Flourish and Blotts. He was greeted enthusiastically by the clerk.

"Hello, Mr. Potter. Wonderful to see you again. What can we do for you?"

"I'm looking for anything you might have about Animagi. I'm doing some research," Harry said.

"Hmm, an obscure branch of magic to be sure, sir. Let me see," the wizard said as he moved off to one of the dustier corners of the store.

Harry began to browse on his own and after a half an hour or so he bought three books, two offered by the clerk and one he found on his own. One was a general reference on magic that contained a section, if brief, on animagic. One was a tract titled 'Oddities of the World of Magic' that had a much more extensive section on the subject. The last was a dusty old volume, perhaps only a hundred pages long entitled "Animagic, the Creature Within." Harry thanked the clerk and walked out of the store and made his way to his last intended stop, the Ice Cream Haven. Since it was the middle of a weekday in winter the store was empty except for Angelina who was taken the opportunity to do some cleaning.

"Harry! What a nice surprise. Social visit or is your sweet tooth acting up?" she asked.

"Sweet tooth. Vanilla with hot fudge sauce, please," Harry said.

"Coming right up."

Harry sat at a table by the window and waited for Angelina. It had been some time since he had gotten a pretty stern talking to about how he didn't stand in line or at the counter. He could just sit himself down and she'd bring it out to him. He did it now without really thinking about it. In moments she strode up to the table and placed the bowl in front of him and then she bent down to kiss his cheek.

After that she folded herself into the chair across from him and looked at him seriously.

“So, you still have a job or do you want to come work here behind the counter?” she asked, her eyes twinkling.

Harry laughed and said,

“I’m still employed. The Minister was very understanding. It remains an official secret and my unregistered status will be overlooked. At least as long as I don’t become a danger to anyone. He’s also going to cut me some slack about going to Hogwarts to do the research I need to do.”

“Oh, Harry, that’s great. It really is an amazing thing. I have to admit when you changed I thought my heart would stop. I hope you don’t mind my saying this but you are one very impressive dragon.”

Harry gave Angelina a ‘look’ and then snorted as he scooped up more of the ice cream. He wondered if one of the reasons he suggested the ice cream store to her was so that he had a place to come to satisfy his urge for sweets. He had a thought and looked across at his sister-in-law.

“You know I love your ice cream but you know what I miss? The cakes and biscuits that we used to get up at Hogwarts for dessert. I wonder why there isn’t a bakery here on the Alley.”

“Good question, Harry. Hogsmeade has the candy shop but I don’t think there’s been a bakery around that I know of,” Angelina said while she looked around the shop. “You know, with a little rearranging I could get another counter in here. I don’t have the room for a bakery kitchen but if we found someone to make the stuff and deliver it, I could sell it here. It would be a way to boost my cold weather income. Hmm, now I need to figure out how to find someone to do the baking.”

“Well, we can start with Mum, she might know of someone and Hannah must be getting her bread and desserts from someone. I’ll ask her on my way back to work,” Harry said.

“Great, Harry. Thanks for such a terrific idea.”

By this time Harry had finished his treat and was fishing out the coins to pay for it. As usual Angelina shook her head as he handed them over but she smiled as they both stood up and hugged each other good by. Harry carried his books under one arm as he made his way to the back door of the Cauldron. He re-entered and looked around for Hannah.

When he saw her he walked over.

“Harry, you’re back. You’re not hungry again, are you?”

“No, but I had a question for you. Where do you get your baked goods from?” Harry asked.

“Um, we make them ourselves, Harry. The Cauldron’s kitchen has a pretty good sized bake oven. Usually we only bake every other day. Otherwise we’d be heating up the oven and not making full use of it.”

Hearing this, an idea occurred to Harry.

“Hannah, can we sit down for a couple of minutes?”

“Sure, Harry, things have slowed a little now that lunch is over. What’s going on?”

Harry and Hannah sat at a table and he explained what he and Angelina had discussed about baked goods.

“Hmm, that’s a very interesting idea, Harry. We couldn’t really make something like that work in here but I imagine Angelina’s would be a perfect spot for it. I need to talk to her about this right away. I’ll get someone to watch the room and I’ll dash right over. This is great, Harry, thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Longbottom. Please give my best to Mr. Longbottom. I’ll try and catch him up my next time at Hogwarts,” Harry said with a grin.

"I will Harry and he'd love that."

Harry smiled and was on his way back to the Ministry. On his way down to his office he detoured and stopped by Hermione's office and was lucky enough to find her in.

"Hiya Harry, come on in. Tom told me you wanted to have a chat."

"Yes, Hermione. It's been a while since we talked any business, especially the last couple of days so I thought it would be a good idea," he replied as he sat down.

"Why don't you close the door," she said, which he did.

"I had a talk with the Mr. Shacklebolt before lunch. He explained his position regarding you and your new, status, I guess. He made it very clear that this was all to be kept in strictest secrecy. I agreed of course but did you think you needed him to tell me, Harry?"

"No, Hermione. You're one of the few people I trust completely. The chat was the Minister's idea. I think he wanted to let you know that he was aware of everything and that he was supporting my remaining unregistered. He was going to have the same talk with Dad, Percy and Ron. Please don't take it personally."

"Well, I guess that's alright then. I was afraid you were thinking back to that whole Firebolt fiasco at school," she said. "So down to business. We have our proposals and we're reviewing them now. Some of the more traditional thinkers are making some objections but I don't think they're willing to put their careers at stake over it. Are you going to be taking a trip to Hogwarts again soon?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing planned but I can do a trip just about anytime. What's on your mind?"

"This is likely to take some time and I don't want the Centaurs to think we're being disrespectful. I thought maybe you could make contact and just let them know we're evaluating their proposal and discussing it," Hermione said.

"I think I can manage that. I'll send Hagrid a message and ask him to arrange it. I think just showing up in the forest might not be proper protocol," Harry said.

"Such the diplomat, Harry," she said with a smile.

Harry just snorted and then laughed. He stayed and they chatted for a bit more and then he left for his office. He wrote the note for Hagrid and sent it off. Next he sent a note to Maxwell asking for a status report on the Patrollers and training. He then sent another to Muntab requesting an update on what she was planning for the Patrollers she was interested in. He then called Tom in and asked him for an update on the incident statistics he had been compiling.

Hogsmeade continued to be the more common site of problems although it was still relatively infrequent. One thing you could say about the magical world. With nearly everyone carrying a wand, it made one think twice before starting any trouble. Harry wrapped things up and decided to go home. He walked up to the lobby and Disapparated home. He could smell something wonderful coming from the kitchen and he poked his head in and breathed deeply. He looked back at the little house elf standing behind him.

"What's the occasion, Kreacher? That smells like a full on Sunday dinner for guests."

"Master Harry has had a very difficult time lately. Mistress Ginny suggested a special dinner would make Master Harry happy. Mistress Ginny has invited Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger to share dinner."

"What a great idea. Guess I should get cleaned up. Is Ginny home yet?"

"No, Master Harry. Mistress Ginny is expected before the sun sets."

"Ok, thanks Kreacher," Harry said.

It turned out to be a great evening and by the time Ron and Hermione left them for their homes Harry was feeling very content. He did notice that he put a major dent in the meal and he was wondering if his recent increase in appetite was a result of the three actual days that he was gone or was it some weird influence of the dragon side of his nature. His message to Hagrid was answered the following afternoon indicating that the Centaurs would be willing to meet Harry the next day and he should meet Hagrid at his hut after breakfast. He was of course welcome to have breakfast at the Great Hall.

So it was that Harry left Grimmauld Place early that morning and made his way up to the main doors. Oddly enough Harry was relieved to see Argus Filch opening the door for him.

"Mr. Filch, it's very nice to see you back on the job. I trust you're feeling better."

The old caretaker looked at Harry with narrowed eyes and then just grunted and turned away. Harry couldn't help but smile and laugh a bit. He made his way to the Great Hall and saw that breakfast was just getting underway. Professor McGonagall waved him up to the head table.

"Harry, welcome back again. I understand you're meeting with the Centaurs this morning. I hope you'll have time to stop by later for a talk," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. I don't think this morning's business should take too long," he replied.

"Excellent. Please, sit and enjoy your breakfast."

"Thank you, ma'am."

He caught Bill's eye and his older 'brother' winked at him. Harry smiled back and nodded briefly. The meal passed pleasantly and as he ate Harry looked out over the students and made eye contact with a few students that were familiar to him including Abigail who gave him a shy and questioning smile and when he smiled broadly back her own became larger. Once he was done he took his leave of the

Headmistress and made his way down to Hagrid's hut. He wondered why Hagrid wasn't at breakfast. As he approached Norbie came bounding out of the hut and made a great deal out of Harry's visit, narrowly avoiding knocking Harry over. Harry had been denied the joys of having a dog when he was growing up so he enjoyed it whenever he had the opportunity to play with Hagrid's, first Fang and now Norbie.

"Hullo, Harry. Good ta see ya."

"Hi, Hagrid. Missed you at breakfast. Everything alright?" Harry asked.

"Had ta be out and about real early this morning, Harry, so I took care of meself. Let's be off," Hagrid said.

The three of them walked into the forest and as before they met Bane and Ronan in the small clearing. Bane looked at Hagrid.

"Friend Hagrid, we would ask that you leave us now."

"Oh, sure thing, Bane. Ya'll bring Harry out again ta the edge of the forest?"

"We will do so, friend Hagrid."

Hagrid looked at the two Centaurs and then to Harry and nodded. He turned and with a call to Norbie walked away from the clearing. Bane looked at Harry and said,

"Welcome back to the forest, Serpent King. We bid you walk with us where we may meet with the others of the herd."

Harry's head turned quickly at the use of the new honorific. Why the change? Did they know?

"I would be pleased to walk with you. I am pleased that my injury is healed well enough that I may do so," Harry replied.

"Let us proceed, it is not all that far."

Harry walked between the two Centaurs down the narrow trail. In fact, he was walking down the trail and they skirted the edges. Despite the winter chill the air under the trees wasn't too uncomfortable for Harry under the heavy winter cloak he wore. Bane and Ronan remained silent. Harry's limited contact with the creatures didn't allow him to gauge if this was normal behavior or they were displaying some reticence. They walked for perhaps twenty minutes or so and came to a screen wall of very large trees.

Ronan stepped out in front of Harry and Bane fell in behind and single file they moved around the trunk of the tree directly in front of them. Beyond was a large circular clearing ringed about with equally large trees whose evergreen branches allowed a small portion of the winter sun through and gave it a light green tint. In the dim light he could see a significant number of Centaurs around the edge of the clearing. A number of them were obviously female. Not knowing what to do, Harry took a couple of steps forward and bowed as best he could to those around the edge of the clearing. He cleared his throat and projecting as best he could said,

"I wish to thank you all for allowing me to speak to you in this place. Your willingness to treat with us, Hermione Granger and myself, is very humbling and gratifying. I would also like to thank you all for the honor and gift you bestowed upon my mate and me. As promised the bow and quiver have been given a place of honor in our home."

A Centaur separated from the rest and moved forward to stand in the center of the clearing. He was obviously a creature of advanced years as evidenced by the flowing gray mane and tail, yet he stood straight and tall.

"Harry Potter, Serpent King. We of this herd have broken with traditions of such antiquity their origins are lost in the mists of time. We have on occasion chosen to speak with those of your race when it suited us. Dumbledore was an occasional visitor to this circle. You are the first that we deemed worthy of the honors that you have mentioned. When the signs first pointed to your coming we wondered what they could mean. They appeared in the constellation called Draco, the dragon. We supposed that it meant you were tied to the

serpent wizard, Voldemort. In that we were right, but it was not the whole of the tale as you now well know."

"So you know about...the dragon?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Serpent King, we know. We also know that you have demonstrated many traits that we do not find common among your kind. Honor, courage, self sacrifice, and a willingness to see others as equal to yourself. The strength of the dragon was there to be seen. Perhaps the lost one saw it first. We see it now and so we invite you here to this special place of meeting," the elder said.

"Is this your home in the forest?" Harry asked in a subdued voice.

"No, Serpent King. For all that we hold you in highest regard, none of your race would be allowed to see that place."

Harry nodded his acceptance of this statement. He found the notion did not chafe. He looked around the clearing, trying to affix the images in his mind for he was fairly certain he would never see most of these people, as he considered them, ever again.

"Now, Serpent King, what would you say to us?"

"I'm afraid that my words are pale shadows of what you have said to me this day. It embarrasses me to say this. I had expected to relay to friends Bane and Ronan that the Ministry is studying the proposal you provided and there is much discussion. Some of those of more traditional thoughts have raised objections. My friend Hermione Granger requested I tell you this and to assure you that these objections will be dealt with and she respectfully asks your forbearance," Harry finished.

"There is no need for embarrassment, Serpent King. Your words offer respect and consideration. They speak well of you and friend Hermione Granger. They confirm that we have chosen well to treat with you. In return I would offer you advice if you would hear."

"I would be more than pleased to hear your advice, sir," Harry said.

A ripple ran around the assembled Centaurs at the use of the honorific by Harry.

“You seek to understand that which has occurred to you. You seek to understand your place in the world. It is proper that you do so. Such knowledge is important to one with the power you possess. But more important still is the knowledge that that place is yours to make as much as find. Look within for the answer as much as without. A path that opens before you may be of lesser value than the path you create yourself.”

Harry smiled at the words and nodded.

“Similar words have been offered to me before. It is gratifying to hear them again from a source of obvious wisdom. I thank you for them.”

Again the ripple ran through those assembled.

“As I thank you for accepting them. Fare thee well, Serpent King. Perhaps we shall meet anon.”

With that the elder Centaur turned and made his way to his left. Those assembled there parted to let him pass and then closed in around him and the whole of the herd faded away through the trees, leaving Harry with Ronan and Bane. Harry stood looking around the now empty clearing.

“We would guide you back to the edge of the forest now, friend Harry Potter,” Ronan rumbled.

“What, oh, yes. Thank you,” Harry replied, obviously distracted.

The three walked in silence. Harry was barely aware of his surroundings as he thought about the implications of the meeting. The first was how did they know? Did Dumbledore or McGonagall send some message or did they find something so specific from their star gazing. Firenze indicated that wasn't the way it worked. Or was there some other magic at work. Why had he gone from Slayer to King? Were all dragons considered kings of the serpents or was there

some other message behind it? He was still pondering these questions when Bane spoke.

“We have come to the edge, friend Harry Potter. Fare the well.”

“Thank you, Bane, Ronan. I greatly appreciate your courtesy,” Harry said as he offered his hand by way of farewell.

Both Bane and Ronan accepted the gesture and as they turned Ronan said,

“As do we yours.”

He watched them move back into the forest and then he made his way the last few yards to the end of the trail and the beginning of the wide lawn that separated the castle from the trees.

Harry could see that Hagrid was not at home, most likely off with his class for the morning. It would still be a while before lunch and an idea struck him so he set off towards the green houses. There were no sounds coming from the large glass enclosed structures so Harry assumed it must be a free period. He opened the door to the first one and looked and listened. He thought he could hear murmured conversation coming from further on so he stepped in, immediately feeling the damp warmth he remember so well.

He opened his cloak and cast about trying to determine where he heard the voices. He thought he got a bearing and headed off to the far end of the building that had connecting ways to where the more advanced students held their classes. Soon he was able to discern the voices of Professor Sprout and Neville. They must have heard his footfalls since they both turned at the same time to see him approaching.

“Harry. Good to see you, mate. What brings you up today?” Neville asked, coming forward to shake his friend’s hand.

“I needed to have a talk with the Centaurs and since I was here I thought I’d look you up. I talked with Hannah the other day and she

told me what you were up to so I figured I'd be nosey. Hello, Professor Sprout."

"Hullo, Harry. It's very nice to see you again. How are you keeping?" the stout little witch asked.

"Doing pretty well, Professor. Nev, Hannah told me you have a really great new project you're working on."

"Yeah, Harry. My field trips have turned up some interesting new plants and we think they may have some significant medicinal properties. I was only able to bring in a few samples of each, so we need to grow more of them for study. Unfortunately the conditions have to be very carefully controlled. None of the hot houses are suitable right now. We're hoping to get a grant or something to refit one of them. It's a fair amount of money."

"How much are you talking about?" Harry asked.

Neville pulled a sheet of parchment from the pocket of his work robe and showed it to Harry. There were a number of lines, each with a number associated with it. The total was at the lower right corner. It was sizeable but compared to some of the numbers Harry had been seeing the last few years it wasn't really all that much.

"My grandmother has offered up some and one or two of the school directors have pledged more but we're still short a little more than half," Neville said.

"I'll put up the rest," Harry said matter-of-factly.

"Harry, I couldn't ask you to do that," Neville said.

"I don't recall you asking me at all, Nev. I offered. Look, Professor Sprout saved Hermione in our second year with that Mandrake juice potion and how many times have I benefited from a healing potion? Considering my tendency for disaster I'm really helping myself here. Just let me know where you want the money put and I'll have Gringotts make the transfer," Harry said with a smile.

“Wow, this is terrific, Harry. I can’t thank you enough,” Neville enthused.

“We’re friends, mate, you don’t have to thank me at all.”

Professor Sprout just smiled and shook Harry’s hand with both of hers. Harry took his leave of his friend and his former teacher and left them talking excitedly over the much used sheet of parchment. His next stop was back up into the castle and down the little side corridor to the portrait with the pear. A tickle and a turn of the handle and he was heading down into the kitchen.

“Harry Potter. What an honor this is. How may we help Harry Potter?” one of the house elves said, his eyes wide with awe.

“You’ve already helped me a great deal. Kreacher gave me your message that you had covered up my tracks at the Quidditch Stadium. I just wanted to come by and say thank you.”

“It is pleased and honored are we to help the great Harry Potter. The great secret is safe with the Hogwarts house elves,” another elf replied.

Harry shook hands with some of the elves, those who were brave enough to come near. He noticed that many remained at a distance. He didn’t sense fear, perhaps it was wonder, or respect, or awe. Those he could deal with, fear would have disturbed him greatly. There were offers of food but he politely declined and indicated he would enjoy their handiwork at lunch with the rest of the school. After thanking them again he left and made his way to the Great Hall which would, in a few moments, begin to fill with students. He took a seat at the far end of the Gryffindor table and looked around at the few students already there studying or playing games.

It wasn’t long before the sound of approaching students filled the corridor leading to the Hall. He received many greetings from those passing by. As several senior Gryffindors approached he began to stand but he was waved back down.

"Please, sir," one witch said. "We'd be happy if you sat with us, there'll be room."

"Is everyone alright?" Harry asked.

"Wilkins took a hard bludger blow in practice yesterday, sir. He's up in the hospital wing. He's still seeing double."

Harry winced in sympathy, remembering the bludger hit that broke his arm his second year. He then felt a pair of arms wrap around his neck from behind and he heard the breathless voice say,

"Hello, sir. It's great to see you. How are you?"

"I'm fine, little one. Wait for me after lunch. I want to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Alright, sir. See you then."

In short order the chaos turned to calm and lunch appeared. Harry had an enjoyable time as he always did when Hogwarts students were around. Since those nearest him were going to be graduating at the end of term a lot of the discussion picked up on Harry's visit at the start of term and the likelihood of employment opportunities. He assured them that the Ministry was still looking for bright, able, enthusiastic witches and wizards. He inquired about the Quidditch team and was distressed to hear that they were struggling this year having lost several key players to graduation last year. Apparently talent was a bit thin in the lower classes and Harry was determined to bring up the subject of the camp before he left.

As the meal was coming to an end Harry made his way up to the dais to intercept Bill before he left to let him know what had occurred. Professor McGonagall moved to join them.

"So, Harry, everything alright?" Bill asked.

"Yeah, Bill. The Minister is behind me. You were right. He's willing to overlook certain irregularities in view of the work I'm doing. He compared it to all the slack I was given here at Hogwarts," he said

with a grin at Professor McGonagall, who regarded him primly from above her glasses.

“I thought it would be like that but I was still concerned. Fleur will be very happy. She was worried about you, not that that’s anything new,” Bill said laughing at the last.

“Hey, Bill, before you and the Head leave, I was talking to some of the Gryffindor seventh years and they said the team isn’t doing well this year. They said the talent pool is a little weak among the lower years.”

“It’s true, Harry. We need some more talent,” Bill replied.

“What about what we talked about at Christmas? The training camp?” Harry asked.

Bill slapped his forehead and said,

“I’m sorry, Harry. What with Fleur and the baby coming and school it completely slipped my mind.”

“What’s this all about, gentlemen,” the Headmistress asked, always interested in anything bearing on the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

Harry explained what he and Ginny had seen at Beauxbaton and the discussion they all had at Christmas. When he was finished he looked at the Headmistress.

“Do you think we’d be able to put something like that together for Hogwarts? Perhaps for this August?” Harry asked.

“I will certainly support the use of our facility for it, Harry, to include room and board. I would have to leave it to you and yours about arranging for coaches and announcements and the like. Why don’t you put something together and come see me and we’ll go over it with Madame Hooch. I’m sure she’ll be most interested.”

“That’s great, Professor. I’ll get with the others and we’ll work something out. I’ll check with Dad this afternoon and see if he’s had a

chance to talk to the folks at Magical Sports and Games. Hey, I gotta go catch up Abigail before I leave.”

“I’ll pass the good news on to Professor Dumbledore, Harry,” the Head said.

“Thank you. I’ll see if I can catch him at the Ministry later. Bye Bill.”

“Bye, Harry. We’ll talk soon.”

Harry smiled and turned to make his way to the Ravenclaw table. He didn’t notice the two professors lean closer or hear their whispered conversation. Abigail was sitting waiting for him so she stood up as he approached. Harry was struck by how grown up she was starting to look. She was approaching her fifteenth birthday and it was starting to show. He knew she was as tall as she would ever be but she was starting to mature in other ways. He also noticed how some of the boys around her were also noticing. Then they noticed him noticing and the look on his face and they quickly found other things to pay attention to.

“So, ready for a little chat, Abigail?” Harry asked.

“Yes, sir, Harry,” she said with an impish grin.

He motioned her to lead the way and they went out the main entrance of the Hall and found a quiet spot to talk in the main foyer.

“I just wanted you to know, if you didn’t already, that things went well for me with the family and at the Ministry. I didn’t manage to scare anyone to death at the Burrow,” he said in a low voice. “Also, the Minister is being very understanding and I won’t have to resign my position.”

“Why would you have to do that, Harry?” she asked.

“An animagus is required by law to register with the Ministry to include a complete description and any indentifying marks. It’s a matter of public record. I don’t intend to register for some pretty obvious reasons and I thought that would make it a problem to keep

my job. The Minister disagreed. He said he could overlook it in light of the work I'm doing. Sort of like how they overlooked things when I was here at school."

She simply nodded to acknowledge her understanding and said,

"I'm happy to hear that, Harry. I know you have so much to worry about, including me. I'm glad keeping your job isn't going to be one of them."

"Speaking of worrying about you, little one, I've noticed you're growing up, are grown up actually. I've also noticed the boys noticing. Anything you think I need to know about?" Harry asked, his face serious.

Abigail began to blush but only a bit and her big dark eyes met his and said,

"Not really, Harry. One or two boys have shown a bit of interest but for the most part I think they don't really know what to think about me. You know, the whole psychic thing? One boy tried to brag about what a great flyer he was and I sorta peeked at him and saw that he had fallen off his broom three times during tryouts for the team. I don't think you have anything to be concerned about," she said wistfully.

"Don't you worry, Abigail. Once they grow up and realize what we already know, you'll find that special someone."

"Thanks, Harry," she said and she leaned her head against his shoulder for a moment.

"Little one?" Harry said.

"Yes, Harry?"

"I know you sometimes feel that your different then everyone else. Believe me, I understand how that feels. I also know that you worry about being alone. I know what that's like, too. Try not to worry about it. It might take some time but I know someone is out there for you. And I'm always here for you."

She looked up at her guardian and smiled and nodded. They sat quietly for a few minutes more and then with a hug they parted company. Harry watched her walk away and then let himself out by the main doors. He was back in his office in less than fifteen minutes.

His first stop after checking for any messages was to stop up and see Arthur Weasley about having made any contact with the Magical Sports office. Yes he had and he was waiting for a response. Apparently things move a little slowly in that office. He would do a follow up in the morning. Next Harry stopped in to let Hermione know what the Centaurs had said but he heavily sanitized the particulars so that she just knew they appreciated the courtesy and were satisfied with the way things were moving.

By the time he was done it was close to quitting time so he wrote up some notes on the idea of the camp in case he needed to talk to the Sports department in the near future and he'd ask if his Mum and Dad would host the clan at the Burrow so they could discuss plans. Considering where he had been a few days earlier life was looking good.

Harry's Future, Part 24

"Based on what we observed and learned at the Beauxbaton Academy of Magic the players received a high level of attention, intense training and practices, and some excellent work in the fundamentals and finer points of flying. My thought was that a similar program conducted at the end of summer at Hogwarts would help raise the level of play, perhaps improve the skills of marginal flyers who otherwise wouldn't think they have a chance to play and to improve the talent pool for the professional teams."

Harry concluded his presentation to the Director and staff of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Also in attendance at the Director's invitation were several managers of the more prominent teams of the Premier British Quidditch League. Harry noticed that while all were paying polite attention, no one seemed particularly enthused. The Director was the first to offer a comment.

"One could draw the conclusion that the French need the extra training in order to come up to our current standard, Mr. Potter. They haven't fared particularly well in international play of late."

This was seconded by several members of the audience. So that's the way it's going to be, Harry thought.

"Nor have we for that matter. We haven't been in a World Cup final in some time. The idea wasn't to make this an issue between the UK and the rest, it was to improve the quality of play in this country overall. I thought that would be of interest to you gentlemen. I suspect I was mistaken. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

"Now, now, Harry," the Director replied quickly. "It's not that we don't appreciate your interest. It's just that there are many factors to consider. Everyone here has spent more than a little time flying above a Quidditch pitch at Hogwarts and for some in the professional leagues. If we thought such a thing was needed it would have been done long ago."

"Ah, I see. Tradition. Old School. I've run up against that a few times and found it very annoying. I'm sorry to see it again. Rest assured,

gentlemen. We are going to go ahead with this since its being sanctioned by Hogwarts. We just thought we'd do you the courtesy of giving you the chance to be involved. Good day."

Harry turned and headed for the door to the sound of voices behind him. He was several steps into the hallway when he felt a hand on his shoulder, not a particularly friendly hand either. Harry stopped and without turning said in a low voice,

"I'd really rather you didn't do that."

He felt the hand tighten and then release. He turned to face the wizard who was now standing before him. He was an older man with a badly broken nose. He had a stocky build and a pugnacious attitude that seemed to surround him like an aura. Harry noticed that several other men that he had been addressing were standing just inside the doorway.

"Listen here, Potter. Just what are you going on about here? You think you're just going to walk in here and change the way we've been doing things for centuries? The famous Harry Potter knows all there is to know about Quidditch and he's going to teach us all about it, is he?"

"First of all, whoever you are, I'm finding your attitude to be more then a little annoying. Those of us who are planning on doing this only want to share our knowledge and skills with young flyers looking to improve. What bothers you about that so much?" Harry asked.

"I don't like amateurs mucking about where they don't belong. It's bad enough I have to read the opinions of a bunch of know nothings in the Prophet. I don't need to listen to one telling us how we should be running the sport," the man said belligerently.

"What team are you connected to, sir?" Harry asked very quietly.

Anyone who knew Harry would probably be looking for another place to be just about now.

"The Wasps, what's it to you?"

"I'd just like those working with us and the players we work with to know how much the Wasps support our efforts. I'm sure it should make your recruiting efforts more interesting. And I'm sure your fans will appreciate your efforts to adhere to the grand tradition of the sport. Good day, sir," Harry said and he turned and started walking away.

He could feel a tension rise behind him. He turned his head slightly so he could talk back over his shoulder.

"Whatever you're thinking of doing, I'd think twice. I doubt you're the wizard Voldemort was and we know how that turned out," Harry said.

He continued walking, berating himself for saying something like that but he was concerned the man from the Wasps would let his temper get the better of him. It was a shame really. The players would have really appreciated having some pros at the camp.

Harry was sitting in his office going over the plans for the camp when he heard a knock on the frame of the doorway. He looked up and saw Hermione standing there.

"Got a minute, Harry?"

"Sure do. In fact, for you I'll make it a few minutes," he said with a grin.

"Well, someone's in a good mood today," she said with a smile as she sat down.

"I guess, although I probably shouldn't be," he replied.

"Why, what's going on?" she asked.

He explained what had occurred at the meeting at Magic Games and Sports earlier. She frowned and shook her head.

"There are still a few of the more hide bound thinkers around here. I guess the Minister doesn't figure it's as much of a problem in a place like Sports. I'm sorry. Is that going to cause a problem with your plans?" she asked.

“Not really. We have the school’s backing and that’s what’s important. That gives us all the facilities we need. I was just hoping with official support the pros would be willing to participate. But like Dad said, we have enough talent on hand to do a good job.”

“Too true.”

“Now, what brought you down here today? I can’t imagine it was Quidditch,” Harry said.

“No, in fact it wasn’t,” she replied. “Since we have the proposals from the Goblins and Centaurs in hand the Director has asked me to come up with something for the house elves. Since they don’t seem able to propose something themselves, we need to press ahead on our own. I’d like to ask you to help if you can.”

“I don’t think that would be a problem, Hermione. Things are ticking away fairly nicely at the moment so I have some time. How would you like to go about it?”

“I thought we could throw around a few ideas right now, then head over to the Cauldron for lunch. Ron said he would meet us there and then we could come back and draft something up that I can show Mr. Grimsson.”

Harry noticed that at the mention of Ron, Hermione started to play with her engagement ring. He smiled to himself. The idea of his two best friends being married seemed so right to him.

“That sounds like a plan, especially lunch, I’m already getting hungry,” he said.

“I’ve noticed you’ve been eating a fair amount lately, Harry, are you ok?”

“I think so, Hermione. I haven’t gained any weight. I’m thinking it might have to do with that other thing.” Since his door was still open he had to be careful of what he said. “I’ve only made the change twice but it seems to require a lot of energy. Plus it might have some

after effects that's causing me to eat. Charlie said pound for pound they don't eat near as much as we do but there's so many pounds difference it still adds up." Then he shrugged.

"It's still so amazing," she said. "Ok, so let's see what we can do for our little friends."

With that they began tossing around ideas that would provide some opportunities and protections for the house elves should they ever want to change their status as indentured servants. As noon approached they left Harry's office and headed for the lobby and then to the Cauldron. Hannah greeted them enthusiastically and showed them to a table for four when she was told Ron would be joining them shortly. The dining room was pretty busy but she still took a moment to take a seat to chat with her two friends.

"It's great to see you two. How are the plans for the wedding coming, Hermione?" she asked.

"Slowly. Scheduling is a bit of an issue what with Ron's duty rotation and all. Plus the idea of how we deal with my muggle family," she said.

"Harry, couldn't you fix things for Ron?" Hannah asked.

"I could and I would, I mean I'm the best man after all, but they refused to let me. Didn't want me accused of playing favorites. It seems my two best friends are fiercely protective of my reputation," Harry said.

"It's called loyalty, Harry, and I can understand their thinking," Hannah said seriously.

"We'll get it straight. We have some ideas and Mrs. Weasley and my mum are going to meet here early next week to figure something out. I'm really glad that they get on so well," Hermione said, then smiled and rose to greet Ron who was approaching from the back door.

Regardless of his discomfort, Hermione never failed to greet him enthusiastically whenever they met in public. After a few moments they sat down and Ron's rosy complexion began to fade.

"Hello, boss. How are you doing?" Ron said with a smirk.

"Fine, Ron, how are things on the streets?"

"Quiet. Just came off the morning shift up at Hogsmeade. Had the desk duty so it was ok. I stayed warm."

It had been decided after Tom Medford's survey that since Hogsmeade needed the most attention in terms of everyday activity that the Patrollers would have a permanent base set up in an old, tiny storefront. Three Patrollers were assigned per shift with two on the beat and one at the desk in the small office. The assignments rotated on a daily basis.

Harry nodded and smiled. Hannah brought up another subject.

"I have to say, Harry, that your support for Neville's project was very generous. He really appreciates it and so do I. He's so enthusiastic about it. When I think of how he was those first few years, it's amazing."

"He just needed to find his calling, is all, Hannah. I think he grew into himself pretty well," Harry said.

"What project are you backing now, Harry?" Ron asked.

Hannah went on to explain what Neville had been working on and what they needed and hoped to accomplish. Ron and Hermione looked at Harry.

"You keep this up, Harry," Hermione said, "and you'll go down as one of the greatest benefactors of the wizarding world ever."

"Only if someone goes blabbing," he said, mock glaring at her.

“Whatever do you mean?” she said airily, tossing her bushy hair, then giggling.

“Besides, with all the time I’ve spent in hospital, I’m probably doing myself more of the favor,” he replied.

Hannah brought the discussion to a close by asking them what they’d like for lunch and then took their orders to the kitchen. The three friends sat and talked for a while about the issues with the camp and other matters and then another topic surfaced.

“Hey, Harry. Did you know that Angelina has branched out to selling baked goods now?” Ron asked. “I was walking the beat on the Alley last week and I saw the sign in the window. I went in and there was a new display case full of bread, cakes and biscuits. The biscuits were great,” Ron finished.

Harry looked at him with those piercing green eyes.

“Don’t worry, chief. I paid for it.”

Harry nodded and smiled.

“Angelina said it was your idea,” Ron went on.

“Well, not entirely,” Harry replied. “I was having a bowl of ice cream and I mentioned that what I missed was the cakes and biscuits we used to get for dessert at times at Hogwarts and wondered why there wasn’t a bakery around here. Angelina picked up on that and suggested the idea of selling stuff from her store if she could find someone to supply it. She and Hannah worked a deal. They have a big underused bake oven here so it worked out.”

By this time Hannah and another server carried out their orders and Hermione said,

“Hannah, we hear you and Angelina are working together selling baked goods.”

“Yes, isn’t that brilliant. Harry was asking me where we got our bread and cakes and I told him how we made them here but the oven was a lot bigger then we required. He suggested I talk to Angelina who wanted to sell baked goods but didn’t have room to bake them. It’s working out really well. We had to hire a baker’s helper to keep up,” she said with a smile and then hurried over to some newly arrived customers.

“So, you left that part out, did you, mate?” Ron said.

“What does it matter? As long as it works out for everyone, who cares where the ideas come from?” Harry said as he began to attack his lunch.

The conversation quickly turned to the topic of the Quidditch camp again and Ron was commenting what a great idea it was.

“I tell you, mate, if we had something like that when we were there I think it might have made things easier for me. I wish I could help out,” Ron said.

“Why can’t you?” Harry asked.

“Come on, Harry. With you and Charlie and Ginny there? I’ll bet Eleanor will be there. Heck, even Bill can still show them a thing or two. What could I do against talent like that?” Ron said disconsolately.

“You could show them what it takes to overcome a shaky start. You could show them how to overcome nerves and heckling and how to dig down deep and pull out a performance that won Gryffindor a Quidditch cup. That’s what.”

Ron sat looking at Harry with his eyes wide. Hermione was looking at Ron with fierce pride.

“It’s easy to think that just because someone isn’t a superstar that they don’t have anything to offer. The truth is that nearly all those kids aren’t, and never will be, superstars or even stars. They’ll just be good competent players, hopefully better for our help, but that they’ll play for pride and fun. They’ll relate to you far better then they would

to me. I keep telling Ginny that she's better equipped to teach Quidditch and flying than I am because of all she had to learn and all the work she had to do to get as good as she is. I'll be there for the ooh and ahh factor but they'll learn from Ginny and you," Harry said, his eyes fixed on his friend's face. "I wouldn't even think of doing this without you right there, mate."

Ron sat in silence for a moment and said quietly,

"Thanks, Harry. I'll be there."

"Good. Now, what about dessert? I'm still hungry."

Harry was sitting in his office going over a small stack of reports on the more mundane matters of running a law enforcement agency. He was making some notes in the margins of one such report when there was a respectful knock on the frame of his doorway. He looked up and saw Milligan standing there.

"Yes, Milligan, what can I do for you?" Harry asked.

"I have some information that you might find interesting, sir," the lanky wizard said.

"Come on in and sit down. What have you got?"

"Well, sir, it seems that your recent activities on the continent are paying dividends."

Harry simply looked at his head of investigations and waited for him to go on.

"When the Prophet printed the press release that the Ministry issued we let it circulate around the cells at Azkaban. We've had a dozen of the smugglers come forward wanting to tell everything they know. We don't know if they figure they need to make a deal or whatever conditioning to stay quiet was broken when that old wizard died but we've been getting names, places, dates, different pieces of the

overall plan and even the uses of some of the more obscure bits and pieces of the contraband. You'll remember the one that your Ms. Westwood took down when they tried to snatch her. When he heard about what happened he started rambling on in his native language. One of the others told us he was saying the 'demon' got them. We figure he means you."

"Wonderful," was all Harry replied.

"I thought you'd like that," Milligan said with a straight face. "The other thing I wanted to talk to you about was that I've been asked to go to Paris. Minister LeClerq is trying to convene as many of the investigative types from across the continent to go through all this and see if they can wrap it up nice and neatly. At a minimum he hopes to make it more organized. It's been pretty haphazard up till now."

"Go ahead. Put in the request and I'll approve it. Anything else?"

"Only that some of the others were asking about how Ms. Westwood is doing and when she might be coming back around. She made quite an impression on them," Milligan said with a smile.

"Tell them she's doing very well and I'll bring her in when she's back home at end of term."

"Thanks, Chief."

Harry could only smile at the thought of all those crusty Aurors doting on Abigail. He went back to his reports and had them finished in time to go home on schedule.

As the chill of winter gave way to the warmth of spring, Harry found himself very busy. Along with his official duties with the Ministry, Harry was working with his family on the plans for the camp, plus talking with Bill about a new lecture for later in the spring. He was also making regular trips up to Hogwarts to confer with Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall about his animagus issues. He had been given unrestricted access to the library and he was searching for any and all information he could. Although it had been discussed

he was unwilling for the time being to take part in any kind of experiment to determine if there was a limit to which his anger could rise before the change would take place spontaneously. The idea of him turning into an enraged dragon again was not one he was ready to entertain.

His appetite didn't seem to be abating much but it wasn't unmanageable. He just didn't leave much in the way of leftovers. Ginny had commented on several occasions that he needed to watch himself. She thought he was looking a little tired. She herself was busy with her Quidditch play. She was nearing the end of her time with the Harpies and she was determined to go out on a high note.

It was late in April and Harry and Ginny had retired for the night, having just returned from a visit to Shell Cottage to see Bill and the very pregnant Fleur. She was due at anytime and hadn't been able to visit as she used to. Harry insisted on keeping his distance since he had been fighting off a case of sniffles and sneezes the last few days.

Sometime in the early morning hours Ginny was roused from her sleep. She was aware that the bed was shaking violently. She rolled over and saw Harry curled up in a ball under the covers shivering uncontrollably. She reached over to touch him to see what the matter was and she pulled her hand back quickly.

"Harry, you're burning up," she said.

"S-s-so c-c-old, f-f-freezing," he stuttered out between chattering teeth.

"Freezing? Harry, you're skin is on fire," she said, and then yelled, "Kreacher!"

The little elf popped into view and asked,

"Yes, Mistress Ginny?"

"Harry is sick. Go to St. Mungo's and get help," she said.

The little house elf did not respond but instantly popped out of sight. Ginny didn't know what to do next. Should she pile on more covers because he felt cold or pull them off because it felt like he was burning up? In a matter of moments she heard hurried footsteps coming up the stairs. She climbed out of the bed and pulled on her robe and went to open the door. As soon as it opened the little wizard that had attended to Harry after his collapse at Hogwarts hustled in to the room with a witch right behind carrying a large valise.

"What do we have here, Mrs. Potter? Your house elf suddenly appeared in our emergency room yelling that Harry Potter was very sick."

"He claims he's freezing but his skin is very hot. I don't know if it's fever, chills or what," she said in a rush.

"Alright, let me see," the healer said.

With the nurses help they rolled Harry onto his back but he was still pulled up in a ball. The wizard waved his wand and chanted his incantations, listened to Harry's heart and checked his pulse. He took several odd looking instruments from the case and held them near Harry's ears and his nose. He pulled back Harry's eyelids to check his eyes. He pulled back a bit at this but continued on. He said something to the nurse and she pulled out several bottles and vials and asked for some warm water. Kreacher, who was standing in the doorway anxiously, hurried off and returned in moments with a pitcher. The water was poured into a tumbler and the contents of several containers were poured in. The resulting mixture took on a number of odd colors and gave vent to fumes that while not noxious were certainly not appealing.

The healer and nurse got Harry to sit up and coax him to drink the potion. This was made difficult by the chattering of his teeth but eventually that got it all down. To this was added a second potion that looked worse but smelled a great deal better. Lastly, several ointments were applied to his chest, throat and just under his nose.

After a quarter hour or so had passed the violent shaking had subsided to mere trembling and this too was gone within another half

hour. Harry was propped up into a semi reclining position with several pillows and an additional comforter was tucked up around him. He appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

"Mrs. Potter, is there someplace where we can talk without disturbing your husband?" the healer asked.

"Yes, we can use Harry's study downstairs," Ginny said, greatly concerned.

"Nurse, please keep an eye on Mr. Potter and call for me if there's any change."

"Yes, Doctor," the witch replied.

Ginny escorted Dr. Elsewhere down to Harry's first floor study. She offered him Harry's favorite chair but he demurred and let her take it while he sat in the one by the desk.

"What's wrong, Doctor? Is it serious?"

"It is, but it could have been much worse if we hadn't caught it in time. Your husband suffered what we refer to as a 'fire storm'. It's a risk all wizards and witches run but more so the more power they possess. It starts with something small like a normal cold or infection. We are after all human, Mrs. Potter and subject to the same illnesses as the muggles. But for us the risk is that if the witch or wizard is run down or further weakened the infection can trigger what you just saw. A fever develops and the body's natural reaction to try and cool itself runs wild and the effect is a massive discharge of energy as heat. The victim feels very cold as the energy dissipates but the surface temperature of the skin goes up. Fortunately, you were here to summon help and I believe he will suffer no ill affect worse then a few days of fatigue."

"What if I wasn't here, Doctor?"

"I can't say for certain, but it has been known to be fatal."

Ginny hugged her robe tighter around herself and stared at the floor. She looked up when the healer coughed.

"If I may, Mrs. Potter, I'd like to ask you something. When I was examining your husband I noticed something odd when I was checking his eyes. I may have been mistaken but I could swear that it appeared his pupils had taken on, how can I say this, a certain verticality. Most unusual."

Ginny was taken back a bit by this but she recovered quickly and her protective instincts kicked in. She looked at the healer and said,

"Harry has been through a lot in his life, Doctor. There are things about him that are, I guess I'd have to say, unique. I can't really tell you anything about what you think you saw unless either Harry agrees to it or it is critical to his condition."

"Well, not knowing I can't say if it is or isn't, but it appears he is responding to the treatment normally so I'd say it's not critical at the moment, so I won't ask you to reveal anything at this time. When Mr. Potter is awake I will put the question to him and he can make the choice," the healer said.

"Thank you for understanding, Doctor," Ginny said, relieved.

"Not at all. So, keep an eye on him. Keep him calm and warm. I'll have a nurse return around noon with another dose of the potions. I'll come out to see him in the evening. I'll take one last look and then we'll be on our way. If anything untoward should occur, just send your house elf."

"Thank you again," Ginny said.

Ginny and the healer went back up to the bedroom and he took a final look at Harry, who was sleeping soundly. The nurse packed up the valise and the two took their leave of Ginny. She pulled a chair over next to the bed and sat down to once more sit a vigil over her husband. After showing the healer and nurse to the door, Kreacher returned and carefully pulled himself up onto the end of the mattress and crouched down to watch Master Harry sleep.

They were still there watching Harry as the sun began to shine through the window. Ginny looked at Kreacher and said,

“Kreacher, would you please go to the Burrow and ask my mum to come here.”

“Certainly, Mistress Ginny,” Kreacher said, then hopped off the bed and popped out of sight.

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later that Ginny heard Kreacher open the front door and welcome Molly Weasley to the house.

“Ginny?” she called from downstairs.

Ginny ran to the top of the stairs and waved her mother up. Mrs. Weasley hurried up the stairs and after a quick hug they entered the bedroom.

“What is it, dear? Kreacher wasn’t very specific, he just said that Master Harry was sick and you asked me to come.”

“Dr. Elsewhere said Harry had suffered a ‘firestorm’.”

Mrs. Weasley let out a sound of dismay and shook her head as she felt Harry’s forehead with her hand.

“You’ve heard of it, Mum?”

“Yes, dear. When your father and I were up at Hogwarts a professor nearly died of it. Seems he caught the flu and he was in the hospital ward when it struck. Fortunately the Healer at the time, this was before Madame Pomfrey, knew what to do. The poor man was bedridden for a week. If I remember correctly, the stronger a wizard is the more dangerous it can be,” Molly Weasley finished.

“That’s what Dr. Elsewhere said. I couldn’t believe how hard he was shivering, Mum. It shook the whole bed and woke me up. There’s something else, Mum. When the healer was examining Harry, he noticed something odd about his eyes. He said he thought the pupils

looked funny, like a cat...or a dragon. I didn't tell him anything other than that Harry had some unique issues and he might choose to talk about it with him after Harry was awake."

Mrs. Weasley clucked her tongue and shook her head.

"Will the poor boy ever know any peace? As for you, young lady, get yourself some sleep. Kreacher can bring me some tea and I'll sit with, Harry. Give him a kiss and off you go."

"Yes, Mum. Thanks," Ginny said.

She walked over to the bedside and leaned down to kiss Harry's forehead. While he felt warmer than usual his skin didn't feel feverish. She then kissed her mother and left to find the guest bedroom for a nap. She was due at Holyhead at one in the afternoon and needed to get some sleep. Shortly after Ginny left Kreacher returned with Mrs. Weasley's tea and then resumed his watch from the end of the mattress.

It was late in the morning when Harry began to stir and after a few more moments his eyes opened and he looked around a bit bewildered. He squinted at the end of the bed and said,

"Kreacher?"

"Yes, Master Harry."

Harry then looked around and saw the familiar outline and he groaned.

"Well, Harry, I can't say as I like that sound of that greeting," Molly Weasley said.

"I'm sorry, Mum. I'm always glad to see you. I just wish it didn't happen so often that I see you while I'm flat on my back in bed. What happened?" Harry asked.

"You don't remember, dear?"

"It's kind of fuzzy, Mum. I seem to recall being hot and cold at the same time and some voices but not much else," he replied.

"You had what the healers call a 'firestorm', Harry. It's a reaction magical folk can have to a normal cold or other kind of sickness. You get a fever and then your body tries to get rid of the extra heat and things get out of control and you wind up trying get rid of all your energy, magical as well. You can quite literally drain yourself. You've had that cold for a few days now and with all the running around you've been doing it left you wide open."

"Well that would explain why I feel like I've been wrung out and hung up to dry. Where's Ginny? Is she okay?"

"Yes, dear, she's sleeping down the hall. She sat up with you since early this morning. She'll be in to see you before she heads to Holyhead," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Boy, she must getting pretty tired of this by now."

"I wouldn't let her hear you say that if I were you, my dear. She's liable to bite your head right off."

Harry smirked a bit and then said,

"Kreacher, would you please get me something to write with and on. I need to send a couple of notes."

"Yes, Master Harry."

"Just bring those things to me, Kreacher. I will write the notes and Harry can sign them," she said sternly.

Kreacher looked to Harry and when Harry nodded he looked back at Mrs. Weasley and said,

"It will be as Master Harry's mum says."

He then hopped down and walked out of the room. Mrs. Weasley looked at Harry with her eyebrows raised and he just shrugged and

smiled back. Kreacher returned with a small lap desk that held parchment, an ink bottle and quill. Mrs. Weasley arranged it and indicated Harry could start dictating. The first message was to Director Grimsson to inform him of the illness and his absence from the office, again. The next message was to Professor McGonagall to postpone his meeting with her tomorrow where they were intended to continue their discussion about his being an animagus. The last was to Gringotts instructing them to transfer an additional one hundred Galleons to the account that was being used to support Neville's work. When Mrs. Weasley looked at Harry questioningly he responded,

"If things like this are going to continue to happen to me I better do all I can to support magical medical research," he said straight faced.

Mrs. Weasley could only laugh and then help hold the lap desk so Harry could sign the messages. Kreacher took them. The one for Hogwarts would go by owl and Kreacher would deliver the other two himself. Just after the little elf left the room, Ginny came in.

"Oh, it's so good to see you awake, sweetheart. You really gave me a turn this morning."

"Sorry about that. From what Mum says I haven't been taking good enough care of myself," Harry replied.

"Don't go beating yourself up about it, Harry. We'll wait until you're well and then I'll do it for you. You just rest and when the nurse gets here, you take your medicine. I've got to get ready, I'll see you before I leave," she said and then kissed his forehead.

Harry looked at his mother and said,

"Any word on Fleur?"

"Nothing yet, Harry. It should be any day now. Let's see, it's the last day of April so we're right there."

They talked about small things for a little while and then they heard the front door knocker. A few moments later a middle aged witch in a St. Mungo's nurse's robe appeared at the door.

"Mr. Potter? I'm here with your potions as prescribed by Dr. Elsewhere," she said a bit tenuously.

"Yes, ma'am. We've been expecting you. This is Mrs. Weasley."

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley said. "Let me get out of your way. Harry, I'll see to a little something for lunch, shall I?"

"Yes, thanks, I am a bit hungry. Unless the potions will change that," Harry said, looking to the nurse.

"It's possible but not likely, Mr. Potter," the nurse said as she opened the case she was carrying and removed two sealed beakers and two tubes of ointment.

She opened one beaker and offered it to Harry. It was the less appealing of the two but he managed to gulp it down. It was nowhere near as bad as Skele-grow potion. The second potion went down a little bit easier but not by much. She then showed him how to apply the ointments which were to be used until the tubes were empty. By the time Mrs. Weasley returned with Kreacher in tow, the nurse had packed up and was prepared to leave.

"He's all set, Mrs. Weasley. Doctor Elsewhere will be out this evening right after he reports for the night shift. I'll be leaving now."

"Thank you, nurse. We appreciate your efforts."

"Not at all, ma'am. Good bye, Mr. Potter," she said and then left.

"She seemed a bit edgy, don't you think?" Harry said.

"I guess she's just not used to being around a celebrity, Harry," his mum said.

Harry just snorted and shifted himself so he could get at the tray of food Mrs. Weasley had set down on the nightstand.

“Well, you can’t be too sick if your appetite is any indication,” she said with a smile.

Harry just shrugged as he started to eat. After he had finished eating he nodded off again until nearly sunset. When he woke up he heard a muted conversation in the corridor.

“Um, hello out there,” he said.

“Oh, Harry dear, I was just talking to Arthur.”

“Hello, son. How are you feeling?” Mr. Weasley asked as he stepped into the room.

“Not too bad. Kind of wrung out but certainly not as bad as the other times,” Harry said with an odd tone in his voice.

“What’s the problem, son? You’re using that voice again,” Mr. Weasley said.

“What voice would that be, Dad?”

“The ‘frustrated Harry’ voice,” Mr. Weasley said with a small smile.

“I guess I’m tired of waking up in a sick bed on a fairly regular basis. The novelty wears off after the third or fourth time,” Harry said.

“I can understand how you feel, Harry,” his ‘dad’ said. “I can’t offer you any sage words to make you feel better about it. Sometimes we just have to accept that things happen. You may want to consider however that although you’ve been knocked around a bit more than most you’ve also been given more than most. Maybe if you just looked at it as a balance it might make it easier to accept.”

“Maybe. Although at times like this I’d be willing to accept less on both sides of the balance. In fact, there are times I think maybe it wouldn’t have been so bad to have stayed a muggle,” Harry said, his voice tired.

“Harry, you don’t really mean that do you?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“Probably not and I guess it sounds like I’m feeling sorry for myself but it gets to be a bit much after a while,” he said, taking a deep breath. “So, any word about the mother to be?”

“Just a twinge here and there,” Mrs. Weasley said. “I understand our dear Fleur is being decidedly grumpy about the whole thing. The serenity of impending motherhood began to wear off around the seventh month. It seems the beauty of the veela has a darker side.”

“I’m sure once the baby’s born that will end. Or at least when she gets her figure back,” Harry said with a grin.

“I think your right, Harry. That will help a great deal,” his ‘mum’ said.

“So, Harry. Do you mind if I stay for dinner?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“No, Dad, that would be great. I don’t think I can get out of bed though. Dr. Elsewhere will be here in a while and it might be good to have you around. Just a minute,” Harry said. “Kreacher, can I see you, please?”

A moment later the little elf hurried into the room.

“Yes, Master Harry, how may Kreacher be of service?”

“Kreacher, can you arrange it so we can eat dinner in here? Mum and Dad would like to stay for a while.”

“Of course, Master Harry. Kreacher will arrange it momentarily.”

“Thanks, Kreacher.”

Mr. Weasley brought in another chair from down the hall and he and his wife sat down next to the bed.

“Anything happen at work that I should be aware of, Dad?” Harry asked.

"Your falling ill stirred things up a bit. Grimsson stopped by to suggest he'd be by tomorrow if it looked like you'd be laid up for more than a few days. I also understand that there is a growing debate going on in Games and Sports over your training camp initiative. It seems that a schism of sorts had been brewing for a while between the old guard and the younger staffers. Word of mouth is spreading around the teams as well. You may have more help than you think," Mr. Weasley said with a smile.

"The help would be great but I can imagine that I'm going to be hearing a lot of griping from the 'old guard'," Harry said.

"Change rarely comes without a price, Harry. You should know that better than just about anyone," Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry just nodded. Kreacher came into the room carrying two wooden folding tables that he placed by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's chairs.

"Where did those come from, Kreacher? I don't recall those," Harry asked.

"The late Mistress Black rarely ate meals at the table, Master Harry. Mistress Black used these tables to eat in her room," Kreacher said.

Mrs. Weasley looked hers over carefully and nodded. Kreacher left the room and returned a few minutes later with a lap table that he placed over Harry's lap as he lay propped up in the bed. On his next trip he had three laden trays floating in front of him and with subtle movements of his fingers directed them to land on each of the portable tables. The meal looked and smelled terrific and Harry attacked it with gusto. There wasn't much discussion during the meal and by the time the knock on the front door suggested the healer had returned they were done and the trays and tables were cleared away. They could hear footsteps coming from the staircase and when the short wizard appeared in the doorway he was greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Ah, sir, madam. How nice to see you here. I've come to see how the young man is doing. I suspect he's filled you in on what has occurred. If I may?"

"Of course, Doctor Elsewhere. We'll just step out in the corridor and give you some privacy," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Thank you," the healer said as he turned to Harry. "So, how are you feeling this evening?"

"Better than this morning. Tired but otherwise alright. I've been eating pretty well too, so I guess that's a good sign," Harry said.

"It is indeed, young man. You used up a fair amount of energy during the 'firestorm' episode. Eating and rest is what you need to set it to rights. Now, just let me have a look," the healer said as he took out his wand and began to move it over Harry while he mumbled incantations.

Next he checked Harry's pulse and listened to his heart and repeated the checks of his ears and nose and eyes. Especially the eyes. He stepped back and looked at Harry.

"Well, young man, I'd have to say you are well on your way to recovery. Certainly the worst is past and you just need a few more days rest and steady meals and you'll be fine," the wizard said.

He then looked at the ceiling for a moment and then back at Harry. He squinted and pursed his lips and said,

"Harry. It may be none of my business but when I was here earlier I noticed something odd when I was examining you."

"What was that, sir?" Harry asked anxiously.

"It was your eyes, Harry. I pulled your eyelids back and it appeared that your pupils were elongated, vertically, like a cat. Is there something I should be aware of as your doctor?"

Harry looked at the small wizard who had been there for Harry on several occasions and he wondered if he should tell him. He was aware of the idea of doctor-patient confidentiality but how far did that go. He decided.

“No, sir, not at the moment.”

The healer nodded.

“Alright, Harry. It’s your choice and I respect that. If you change your mind, you know where to find me. One more full day of bed rest and two days after that of rest at home, but nothing more strenuous than sitting up and reading. Make sure you eat well, all three meals a day. If you have any further concerns come see us,” the healer said as he offered Harry his hand and then left the room.

Molly and Arthur Weasley re-entered the room and took their seats again. Harry looked over at them and asked,

“Could you hear?”

“No, dear. We moved down the hall far enough to allow you your privacy,” Mr. Weasley said.

“Apparently during the firestorm episode my eyes started to look like a dragon’s. I didn’t say anything about me being an animagus. Did you know anything about that?”

“I did, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said. “He had discussed it with Ginny but she kept your secret. She told me about it when I first arrived. What else did the Doctor Elsewhere say? How are you progressing?”

“Tomorrow is another day of bed rest and then two days under house arrest but I can be up and reading or something like that,” Harry said.

“House arrest, Harry? Is that what Dr. Elsewhere said?” Mr. Weasley asked incredulously.

“No, but that’s what it feels like. I hate being stuck here like this. If it’s not one thing it’s another. I’m certainly not going to win any awards at the Ministry for attendance,” he said, his tone full of the annoyance he was feeling.

“Come on, Harry. It hasn’t been that bad. You did lose a fair amount of time after the dragon incident but if I recall correctly you’ve only missed the few days after you came back from Europe and now this. All the other times have been on official business to Hogwarts and the like. Its not much compared to some of the others at the Ministry that I know, they spend most of their time out of the office. Don’t let it concern you, son. Just relax and get well,” his ‘dad’ said.

“Yes, sir. I just get this feeling trouble is brewing,” Harry said.

“Have you heard something, Harry?” Mrs. Weasley said.

“No, sir. Just a feeling,” Harry said.

“Well, your feelings have a pretty good track record. I’ll keep my eyes and ears open,” Mr. Weasley said.

They heard voices in the corridor downstairs and in a moment Ginny was hurrying into the room.

Hi, Mum, Dad. Harry, how are you doing, sweetheart? Was the healer here already?” she said in a rush.

“I’m feeling better, but still kind of tired. Yes, the Doctor Elswere was here and he said I was doing ok and I need some rest over the next few days. He mentioned about the eyes but I told him I didn’t have anything to tell him at this point.”

“If you’re sure that’s how you want to handle it, Harry. I’m going to go down and see if Kreacher has anything left for dinner and then I’ll be right back,” Ginny said and then hurried out of the door.

Harry watched her leave and then took off his glasses and rubbed his face with both hands and then leaned back into the pillows. He stared up at the ceiling and then blew out a long slow breath. He then looked over at his ‘parents’ and gave one of his crooked smiles.

“Dad, would you do me a favor when you go in tomorrow? Would you ask Maxwell and Milligan to come out day after tomorrow? At least I’ll be able to get some work in. Milligan came back from Paris with a lot

of information that we've been trying to correlate with what we've found locally. I thought it was complex before but now..." he trailed off and shrugged.

"Sure, Harry. I'd be happy to," Mr. Weasley said.

"And If you could suggest to the Director he doesn't really need to bother coming out here, I'll be back in by Monday."

Mr. Weasley just nodded. Ginny came back with a tray and the lap table that Harry had used. She placed it on the bed and carefully climbed up to sit cross legged facing Harry. Mrs. Weasley nudged her husband and said,

"Well, now that you're home, Ginny, your father and I will head for home. Harry dear, I'll stop by around lunchtime tomorrow to see how you're getting on, alright?"

"Ok, Mum," Ginny replied.

"Thanks, Mum," Harry said almost at the same time.

"So long, son, I'll make sure your message gets to Maxwell and Milligan."

"Thanks, Dad."

Harry watched them leave and then heard Kreacher open and then close the door for them. He looked over at his wife and then reached for his glasses and put them on. He smiled and said,

"Ah, that's better. I prefer to see you without all the fuzzy outlines."

"Oh, dear," Ginny replied. "I thought I was years away from becoming fuzzy around the edges."

They both laughed and as Ginny ate they shared some small talk about how things were going with the Harpies. Several unfortunate injuries among the principle players were challenging Ms. Hapnafi as she had to make due with reserves. Ginny's impending retirement

wasn't making things any easier. She was receiving some favorable feedback from her articles. Harry wondered what the man from the Wasps would have to say about an actual flyer of some fame contributing to the 'know nothings' at the Prophet. Ginny finished her meal and at Kreacher's insistence placed the table and tray out into the corridor for the little elf to retrieve. She got ready for bed and climbed in next to Harry and they wrapped each other in hugs and settled into the pile of cushions behind Harry. They chatted quietly for a while until Harry slipped off to sleep. Ginny listened to his steady breathing for a time and allowed it to lull her to sleep as well.

When Harry awoke the next morning he could feel the warm and welcome weight of Ginny pressed up against his side. He recalled that he was supposed to spend the day in bed again and at the moment that wasn't something he was going to argue with. While his mind was awake his body still felt like it wanted to sleep for another week. Harry decided he'd have a serious talk with Dr. Elsewhere about improving the general condition of his health and fitness. He was coming to believe that he was proving a far too frail vessel for the amount of magical talent and energy he was being required to contain. He looked over and down at Ginny and even without his glasses he could see she was still fast asleep. Yesterday had been every bit as tiring for her as it had been for him.

He took the opportunity to run through a mental list of things that were going on and who he had helping him with what. Contrary to his initial misgivings about the need for an assistant, Tom was proving to be a vital part of his team and he needed to make the necessary arrangements to make the transfer permanent. He would also be getting an intern around mid summer and he was thinking that he would assign him or her to act as Maxwell's assistant, at least on a part time basis. He needed to talk to Muntab about her ideas about training up those Patrollers that looked promising. He thought it might be a good idea to talk to the Director of Testing to see how they might address those who hadn't gone for their NEWTs. The elderly witch and her team had done an excellent job with the initial tryout and seemed happy to be of help. Hopefully she'd be as helpful this time around.

Another proposal involving the international community had been brought back by Milligan from Paris. It had been suggested that a conference of the heads of magical law enforcement from all across Europe be convened during the summer to begin the task of crafting a framework for more coordinated cooperation. The ongoing investigation had highlighted the holes that existed and how well they had been exploited. It had been suggested that Harry be one of the featured presenters with the subject being his reorganization of the Aurors and the Office of Magical Law Enforcement.

Then of course there were his commitments to Hogwarts to include the aforementioned interns, his lectures and the camp. The last was rapidly picking up steam. Bill and Charlie were proving to be a huge help. Bill was talking it up at Hogwarts and there was a lot of interest. Charlie was diving head first into the planning of the training days, how to divide up the players, who would teach what group and all manner of details. It seems that just below the surface there was a Quidditch coach straining to get out and once the opportunity presented itself there was no holding him back. Harry was hoping he would start to hear from those professionals that his father had mentioned and see how they could be folded into the program.

An idea began to form in the back of Harry's mind and it waved its arms and jumped up and down to try and attract his attention. Harry closed his eyes and tried to calm his thinking to let this fragile, forming thought make its way forward. When it managed to force its way to the front of his mind it was quite startling. It was dawning on Harry that perhaps he didn't have to do all these things for himself. Perhaps it was sufficient that he act as a catalyst. That odd little bit of whatever that caused things to happen without being changed by the reaction. Maybe it was enough that he give rise to an idea and let others move it along to fruition. Surely it wasn't necessary for him to make sure that Neville and Professor Sprout get their project completed. He merely needed to take an interest and provide some financial and moral support and then watch as they brought it about.

He and Ginny brought the idea of the Quidditch camp back from Beauxbaton but he didn't necessarily have to be the one to do all the work. He had his brothers, the staff at Hogwarts and perhaps those pros that liked the idea to do most of the actual work. All in all it was a

very intriguing notion and one that he dwelled on for some time. He was still at it when he felt movement at his side. He looked down and could tell that Ginny had shifted around so that she was facing him. He reached to his bed stand and found his glasses and put them on.

Now he could see those beautiful brown eyes looking up at him.

“Good morning, love. How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Hey, that was supposed to be my line. You’re the one who’s sick, remember?” she said with a grin.

“In that case, I’m feeling pretty good, although another day in bed doesn’t sound so bad. What about you then?”

“I slept like a log. I’ll be leaving after breakfast but at least I can make sure you eat well before I do,” Ginny said.

“Love, I haven’t stinted on a meal since the night I went dragon,” Harry said with a grin. “I wonder if this is like Bill with the rare meat. That was his only lasting effect of the werewolf attack besides the scars. Could be trouble with the grocery bill.”

“You can be so silly, sometimes. Have you been awake long?”

“Not too long. I did have the chance to think for a while,” he said.

“About what?”

“Mostly about things going on, what I have to do once I get out of this bed. Something started to occur to me though,” he replied. “I was thinking about all these things and who was doing what and I realized that I didn’t have to do all of it myself. That it was ok to come up with an idea or start a project and have other people do a lot of the work. It’s not even like I have to make them do it. Bill and Charlie are so enthusiastic about the Quidditch camp I couldn’t keep them away from it if I tried. Tom Medford works twelve hour days and he loves it,” he concluded looking at her.

She sat up in bed and looked at Harry with a funny smile on her face.

“Well, I’ll be darned. I’ve witnessed a true breakthrough. You’ve finally seen what everyone has been seeing for years, Harry. You’ve talked and talked about team work and you’ve constantly given credit to others who were there when all those important things happened and now it looks like you finally understand that they are eager to help you with the things you’ve had to do. Now you can look at things and say, ‘Hey, I have an idea, I wonder who I can get to help me with it’ instead of ‘oh, something else I have to do’.”

Ginny’s eyes were bright as was her smile and then she leaned in and wrapped Harry in a hug and gave him one of those long lingering kisses that he loved so much. It was some time before they called for Kreacher about breakfast.

It was late in the morning and Harry was lying propped up against his pillows reading one of the books that he had found dealing with animagic. He heard the door knocker and Kreacher greeting whoever it was. Harry suspected, correctly, that it was his ‘mum’. He was watching the door as she appeared.

“Harry, dear. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Pretty good, Mum. Still a little fatigued but better than yesterday. I had a good breakfast and now I’m just resting and reading.”

“That’s wonderful, dear,” she said as she sat down in the chair next to the bed. “I have something for you. Charlie and Bill sent a draft of the schedule and plan for the camp. Charlie was at the house last night and when we got home he talked some things over with your father. He and Bill had worked out some details earlier out at Shell Cottage. Those two are like boys again. I don’t think they realized how much they missed playing Quidditch.”

“Speaking of Shell Cottage, what’s the word on Fleur? It’s the first of May. She has to be ready by now,” Harry said anxiously.

“I dare say she is, Harry. When we saw Charlie he said it looked like it was very close. I’m going to head out there after I’m done here. I’ll

stay until the baby is born. I hope you won't mind me not coming the next few days."

"Of course not, Mum. You spend more than enough time keeping an eye on me. Fleur needs you now. I just wish I could go with you," he said earnestly.

"Harry, dear. I know that you've been through some pretty harrowing times in your life and you're braver than whole armies, but I don't think you really want to be in that house when Fleur goes into labor."

They looked at each other and laughed. They talked for a while longer about various things and at noon Kreacher began setting the room up for lunch. By one o'clock Mrs. Weasley was satisfied that Harry was eating well and had kissed his forehead and told him she'd be back when she was done at Shell Cottage. Harry knew that Fleur was in good hands. He felt a little twinge of sadness at the idea that as a true mother his silver blonde guardian angel wouldn't be able to watch over him so much. On the other hand, he was delighted that her mothering instincts would be put to the use that they were truly intended.

The following morning Harry was happy to be able to join Ginny at the kitchen table for breakfast. He moved slowly as he walked through the house but he didn't feel too bad overall. He dressed himself in casual clothes and sat in his well cushioned chair in the study waiting for Maxwell and Milligan to join him. Just as the clock struck nine he heard the knocker at the front door. In a few moments Kreacher escorted the two older wizards into the room.

"Come on in. Kreacher, would you bring another chair in, please?"

"Certainly, Master Harry."

As the senior, Maxwell took the one chair and Milligan waited until Kreacher floated an extra into the room. Once Kreacher had left and Milligan was seated they began their meeting.

"So, any wild rumors running rampant through the Ministry about my being sick?" Harry asked with a crooked grin.

Maxwell and Milligan looked at each other and the senior Auror nodded. Milligan pulled out a copy of the Prophet and handed it across to Harry. Harry took it with raised eyebrows and unfolded the paper and his eyebrows went even higher when he saw the headline which read,

Harry Potter Near Death

Below the headline was an article that seemed based mostly on the assertions of informed ministry personnel that Harry's latest episode had him hovering on the brink of death. It also speculated that Harry's continued fragile health, first evidenced by his collapse shortly after the defeat of Voldemort was being hushed up by officials of both the Ministry and St. Mungo's. There were reports, the article continued, that emergency personnel were dispatched from the hospital to the undisclosed location of Harry's London home the night before last to find him critically ill. Harry looked at the masthead for the paper and noticed that there was a new editor. He looked at Milligan and Maxwell and said,

"So, I guess the honeymoon is over. It took longer then I thought it would but I guess it had to happen sooner or later. It should make for an interesting homecoming when Ginny arrives later tonight. You think I have a temper. I'll make sure I take a turn around Diagon Alley on Monday and let people see I'm still alive. Anything of any real importance going on?"

They spent the next hour going over the business of the department. When they were done Harry walked them to the door and thanked them for coming out. He went back to the study and took another glance at the Prophet and then tossed it into the trash. He picked up his book and read until lunch.

Much as Harry had predicted, shortly after sunset the Black house was graced with a demonstration of temper as art. Ginny stormed past Kreacher who had opened the door for her with a copy of the Prophet gripped tightly in her hand. She walked into the study and stood in front of Harry waving the paper, her eyes in a tight squint and her brows pulled down.

"Have you seen this, Harry?" she said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Yes, I have, dear," he said calmly, pointing to the rubbish bin where the offending edition resided.

"What are you going to do about it?" she demanded, her voice climbing

"I'll ignore it, officially. Unofficially, on Monday I'll take a turn around Diagon Alley, stop into a couple of the shops and have lunch at the Cauldron. If anyone asks, I'll tell them I wasn't feeling well this past week but it was just a bad cold. Later in the week I'll head up to Hogsmeade and stop in at the school. Perhaps at some point I'll visit the Prophet and have a chat with the new editor," Harry finished up, matter-of-factly.

"Well, I already had a little chat with the editor before I came home. I told him he could take his job on the sports page and stick it somewhere that wouldn't make it into print. I also told him the next time he wanted to print something about you he could damn well come out here and check the facts for himself."

"But, Ginny. You were really looking forward to that job. People really seemed to like it."

"Harry, how could you think that I would continue to write for a rag that's going to start that nonsense again? There are other publications that I can write for. Or maybe I'll just concentrate on starting our family. But if those idiots are going to start up with the nonsense you had to put up with in the past, I'll have nothing to do with them."

Harry stood up and walked up to his wife. He wrapped her in a hug and rested his cheek on top of her head. He loved the smell of her hair. He could feel the tension start to flow out of her. They stayed that way until Kreacher announced it was time for dinner. Hand-in-hand they walked into the kitchen to eat. Harry knew that whatever the Prophet had in mind for him it wasn't going to affect him as it had in

the past. That Ginny might take it into her mind to take the Prophet's office apart brick by brick concerned him, but only just a little.

Harry's Future, Part 25

Harry sat in a comfortable chair in the main bedroom of Shell Cottage. It was Sunday afternoon and he was paying his first visit to the new mother and her daughter, his first niece. It had taken a handwritten note from Fleur to get him to make the trip. He had been afraid that his recent illness might prove dangerous to either or both of them. He did however refuse to make any physical contact with the mother and newborn and the first few moments of the visit were a classic display of the immovable object meeting the unstoppable force. They had glared at each other until Fleur gave in since his stance that it was too great a risk of spreading his illness held the moral high ground over her insistence of being given her due in terms of hugs from Harry.

Fortunately, Fleur wasn't one to hold a grudge and as quickly as the tension had risen it had passed. They were now having a pleasant chat while Ginny helped Bill put together something for them all to eat. Fleur was lying in bed, the baby cradled in her arms, her flowing hair pushed over to one side. Her blue eyes were bright but it was obvious that she was feeling fatigued. Her smile was warm however, full of a mother's love. Harry had a quick flash of an image of another young mother, her hair red instead of silver blonde and with bright green eyes. He wondered how often he had been held like that. His vision began to blur as his eyes began to fill.

"arry, what is wrong, mon frere?"

"I'm sorry, Fleur, nothing wrong, I'm just happy everything went well for you and the baby," he lied, sort of.

"Don't not try to fool me, 'arry. I know you too well. Those are not tears of joy you are tryeeng to hold back."

He took a deep breath and replied,

"Alright, I was just looking at you and thinking of how my mum must have looked holding me," he said and shrugged a little.

Fleur tried to smile back but she too was now having trouble holding back the tears. Harry smiled back a bit and reached out and patted her leg that was under the comforter. This got a bigger smile. Harry realized that in many ways, Fleur was a soul mate. Not in the traditional romantic sense but of a friend so close that she knows what he is feeling before he feels it.

She looked at him closely and nodded. At that time Bill and Ginny entered the room with trays bearing light snack foods and beverages. Bill sat on the bed and took his daughter gently. The look on his scarred face was one of fascination and wonder.

"So, how are you two getting on? Victoire seems to be content," Ginny said.

"She should be," Bill said. "She certainly spent enough time last night being very uncontented."

"Mum said the first days will be the toughest," Ginny replied.

"Some'ow I theenk we weell survive eet. Nearly everyone does," Fleur said with a smile. "What are you theenkeeng 'arry?"

"Hmm, I was just thinking it's hard to believe that she was born on the anniversary of the big battle. It hasn't really been all that long but it seems a lifetime ago," he said quietly.

"It certainly has been eventful, that's for sure," Ginny replied.

"When are you going back up to school, Bill?" Harry asked.

"Not until Tuesday morning. Mum will come back out and spend the rest of the week with Fleur. She's practically floating. Now that she has one grandchild the pressure will be on you two and George and Angelina," Bill said with a laugh.

"Well, I don't know about that, Bill," Ginny said. "Besides, it's been too much fun practicing."

Harry went red and Bill and Fleur started to laugh until Victoire started to fuss and they all quieted down, but Fleur was still giggling. They continued to chat for a while longer and it became obvious that Fleur needed to sleep so Bill put the baby in the crib at the foot of the bed and after kissing his wife, led Harry and Ginny out into the living room. They sat down and spent the rest of the afternoon going over the plan for the Quidditch camp.

"Interest is high, Harry. There should be plenty of students and the question we're working on now is transportation. The way we have it scheduled the students would be coming two weeks early to school so maybe we could arrange a special run of the Express. Otherwise we'd need to look as some sort of arrangement on the floo network. My guess is, though, that we can get the train."

"I'm glad to see everything looks to be going well. Is there anything you need me to do? It seems like you and Charlie are doing most of the work," Harry said.

"Don't worry about it, Harry. Charlie and I are having a blast. Plus he's getting help from Eleanor. It looks like a bunch of the Harpies are planning on helping out. Did you know that, Ginny?" Bill asked his little sister.

"Yes, although not a lot of the details. Commuting from London keeps me a little out of the loop. But lots of the girls are really looking forward to it and Ms. Hapnafl wants us to keep an eye out for any promising female players. Any pro team that doesn't have someone there is going to be at a disadvantage when it comes time to recruit," Ginny said and then she looked at Harry. "See, Harry. You were right when you said it was ok to come up with an idea and let someone else run with it."

Bill looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow. Harry proceeded to tell Bill what he had been thinking about the other morning while he was lying in bed. When he finished Bill looked at him with a smile on his scarred face.

"Well done, Harry. That's an important thing for a leader to realize. Can you imagine Professor McGonagall or Kingsley Shacklebolt

trying to do everything themselves? In many ways all the things that you've been doing the last few years adds up to just as large an effort as either of those two. Let us help you get things done. In fact, Charlie and I were just saying the other night that we should find a way to thank you for coming up with a way for us to get back into Quidditch in such a big way."

"No need, Bill. I'm glad you're enjoying it so much," Harry said with a grin.

"How's everything else going, Harry? Any issues with the animagus situation?" Bill asked seriously.

"Well, no troubles at the moment. I haven't felt the need to make the change and I haven't found any situations that made it happen, well sort of."

"Sort of?" Bill asked.

Harry explained to Bill that what he was told happened when he was in the midst of the 'fire storm'.

"I wonder if it was the fire storm prompting the dragon or the dragon reacting to the illness and trying to control it," Bill said thoughtfully. "Harry, I know things like this bother you but as a teacher and having done a fair amount of research when I was working as a curse breaker, I think you really need to think about preserving your unique position in the magical world for posterity."

"What are you talking about, Bill?" Harry asked.

"I think you need to start writing down your experiences, your insights and your understandings so that they will be available to those that come after you."

"What, like an autobiography or something?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yes, exactly," Bill said.

"No, I don't think that would work, Bill," Ginny said to the surprise of her brother and her husband.

"Why not, Ginny? You don't think that all that Harry has done and learned and will do in the future isn't important?" Bill asked.

"Oh, no, I think you're absolutely right about how important it all is, Bill. In fact, it's too important to leave to Harry," Ginny said seriously.

"What's that supposed to mean, Ginny?" Harry said with some heat.

"Calm down, Harry. I simply mean that your tendency to downplay what you do would most likely spill over into trying to write all this amazing stuff down. No, I think it would be better if someone else was to do it and I think I know who. Me."

"You?"

"Yes, my dear, me. You know I like to write and with what happened with the Prophet I might not have as much to do for a while so I think I'll buy myself a journal and start," she said. "Thanks, Bill. I think you just gave me a really interesting project."

Harry looked over at Bill, not exactly outraged but certainly not all that pleased. Bill looked back and smiled and said,

"Sorry, Harry. Greatness has its price."

Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head. As the sun began to set Harry and Ginny snuck one more peek at the sleeping mother and child and then bade Bill farewell and headed for home. When they arrived they were, as always, welcomed at the door by Kreacher and then directed to the kitchen where he served them their dinner. They ate in silence for a few moments and then Ginny said,

"Are you really that upset by this, Harry?" Ginny asked quietly.

"I don't know that I'd say I was upset but I guess maybe it's that I'm not comfortable with the idea, love. It just seems like I'm bragging or showing off or something," he said.

“Sweetheart. Don’t think of it that way. Look, you don’t hesitate for a minute to get up in front of a group of people, not matter how big or small, to talk about what you’ve learned about Defense Against the Dark Arts and you always do it with the best interest of the students and the rest of the magical world in mind. You’re not bragging, you’re teaching. That’s what this is. You’d make all that knowledge available to anyone who can read it, even long after we’re gone. Does that make it sound more like the great idea it is?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t know that I’d call it a great idea, but put that way I guess it’s one I can deal with,” he said.

Ginny smiled brightly. Harry promised that he would stop at the stationary store in Diagon Alley and order her some supplies for the project. They went to bed soon after dinner as Ginny needed to be at Holyhead early and Harry thought he should be at the office early after his absence.

When Harry arrived for work the next morning he made his way straight to the Director’s office. The secretary looked up at him and said,

“Mr. Potter, you’re looking well this morning.”

“Thank you, is the Director in?” Harry asked.

“Yes, sir, I think he should be available.”

Harry walked over to the office door and knocked.

“Yes?”

“It’s Harry Potter, sir.”

“Come in, please,” the Director called out.

Harry opened the door and walked in. Mr. Grimsson waved Harry into the chair across from him.

“Harry, good to see you looking so well,” Grimsson said with a smile.

“Thank you, sir. I’m afraid the stories of my impending death were somewhat exaggerated,” Harry said with a smile.

The Director rolled his eyes and looked at Harry seriously and said,

“You can imagine that article in the Prophet created quite a stir. When Maxwell and Milligan returned I made sure that the word got around that you were fine and would be back in few days. I just wonder what they thought they’d gain from this. The Prophet took such a drubbing after the truth about you finally came out the last time,” the Director said.

“Well, they have a new editor so maybe he has to learn the lesson on his own. Plus he’s probably trying to increase readership and nothing sells like a scandal, or so I’m told. And it’s a plausible story what with all the time I’ve spent laid up in the last few years, starting with Hogwarts. I intend to head over to Diagon Alley later this morning and have a walk around. More than enough people should see me to prove them wrong. Anyway, I just wanted to stop by and let you know I was back and in one piece.”

“I’m glad you did, Harry. I endorsed Milligan’s report on his trip to Paris and I’m sending it up to the Minister with a strong recommendation that we participate in the conference this summer. I think you need to seriously consider attending and accepting the invitation to present. My guess is that the Minister will strongly support the idea as well,” the Director said.

“You’re probably right, sir. It’s most likely not a bad idea so I’ll start thinking about how we’ll put something together for it.”

“Good. I’ve also got confirmation on the intern that will be assigned to your office. He’s a Hufflepuff sixth year with some very strong performance in DADA and charms. Have you given any thoughts as to what you’ll have him doing?” the Director asked.

“Yes, sir. I’ll assign him part time to assist the deputy chief. I’m finding Tom to be of immense help and I’m sure Maxwell can also use a

hand with the details. I think I'll also have him do some work with Milligan sorting through data, compiling reports, that sort of thing. We're trying to establish a more effective way of looking for patterns in the evidence we turn up. This current business was scary enough that I don't want us caught napping again," Harry said.

The Director merely nodded and then said,

"I think that covers all I have, Harry. If you don't have anything else why don't we get to work? Oh, one last thing. I'll give some thought to the conference and see if there's anything the Minister or I think you need to include but I'd imagine you'll cover it well enough on your own," he said with a smile.

"Yes, sir. I'll keep you advised as I pull it together," Harry replied as he rose and then left the room.

He made his way down to his office and he wasn't there more than ten minutes when Tom Medford knocked on the doorframe.

"Tom, good morning. How are things going?"

"Good, sir. I have some things for your signature and a request from the Director of Magical Games and Sports asking for some of your time when it's convenient. Word is that he's taking a lot of grief over your Quidditch camp idea. Apparently it got out that the department wasn't supporting it and he's been getting messages from fans, retired pros, broom and equipment suppliers demanding why they aren't promoting an attempt to improve and expand the popularity of the sport," Tom said with a small smile.

"I'll go through the things you need signed first thing and then I'm going to see if Hermione is in this morning. I'll get around to Games and Sports when I can," Harry said.

He had been giving the article in the Prophet some thought and he had an inkling about where the Ministry information had come from. Tom left the stack of parchment on Harry's desk and went back to his own little office. Harry spent the next hour catching up on what was going on and when he was done he placed the stack of signed

reports on the corner of his desk for Tom to find later. He walked up to see if Hermione was in. He noticed she tended to keep her door closed whether she was in or not. He knocked.

"Yes, who is it?" came the voice.

"It's Harry."

He heard a chair bang into a file cabinet and a few rapid footsteps. The door swung open and there was Hermione, her smile bright and wide.

"Oh, Harry, it is so good to see you. How are you feeling?" she asked as she pulled him into her office.

"I'm feeling much better, Hermione. The cold is gone and I've gotten my energy back so no problems."

"Ron and I should have come to see you Harry but I started to wonder if maybe with the newspaper article the less fuss the better. I don't know if it was the right thing to do," she said, biting her lower lip a bit.

"It's ok, Hermione. That took me by surprise, too. It was almost like the old days. Ginny quit writing her articles for them. I have a feeling I know what's going on but I need to do a little snooping first. Anyway, did you get out to see Fleur and the baby?"

"Yes, isn't she the cutest thing ever? We were there on Saturday. Fleur was wondering when you were going to get there," Hermione said with a little grin.

"I was just trying to be careful. You know that newborns need to be protected from germs and stuff," Harry said.

"Yes, Harry, I know."

"So what about you and Ron? Did your mum and mine get it straightened out? I just thought being the best man I should know where to show up," Harry said with a lopsided grin.

"In a manner of speaking. We are going to have a very private wedding. Bride and groom, best man and matron of honor and parents. Then we'll have a reception party for my muggle family and another one at the Burrow for our magical family," Hermione said.

"Are you ok with that, Hermione? Don't you want something bigger?"

"Harry, I'm going to let you in on a little secret, we'll maybe a big secret. I've been absolutely terrified of the idea of standing up in front of a big group of people and saying vows and all the rest. Do you remember when I walked up in front of the Great Hall to get my scroll for the Special Act award?"

"Yes."

"It was all I could do to keep from fainting," Hermione said quietly.

"I can't believe that, Hermione. You're one of the bravest people I know. All that time we spent together tracking down horcruxes you never missed a beat."

"Thank you, Harry. I know it's an irrational fear but it's still a very real one for me. One of the things I admire most about you is the way you can get up in front of a big crowd of people and lecture and answer questions and you make it look so easy. To me, that's as brave a thing as any time you've faced off against Voldemort."

"Wow, I never knew, Hermione," Harry said, truly amazed at this revelation. "Um, where would you like me to show up?"

"It'll be easy, Harry. You and Ginny just need to be at the Burrow by noon on the last Saturday in June."

"Ginny? Ginny is going to be your matron of honor? When did you ask her?" Harry asked.

"Last week before you got sick, Harry. I guess it got lost in all the excitement."

“Well, Hermione. I can’t tell you how happy I am that you got it all worked out. I like the idea of my two best friends being married,” Harry said with a big grin.

“Thanks, Harry. I kinda like the idea myself,” she said with a bigger grin.

“Ok, now that we’ve handled all the family matters, what do you say we deal with some work?” Harry said.

“Wow, Harry. I didn’t think I’d ever see the day when you’d be the one suggesting we get to work,” Hermione said with a laugh.

Harry left Hermione’s office about half an hour latter and made his way to the lobby and Disapparated to Diagon Alley. It was a warm day and he knew he’d enjoy the walk, definitely if things worked out the way he wanted them to. He began a slow stroll making his way toward Weasleys Wizard Wheezes and he noticed several people looking at him. He smiled and nodded toward them as he approached the door to the shop. He stopped when he heard a voice from behind him.

“Harry, Harry Potter.”

Harry turned and found Angelina’s dad, Mr. Johnson hurrying up to him. As he came to stand before Harry he wore a broad grin but his eyes were questioning.

“Harry, it’s so good to see you up and around. I read that ridiculous article in the Prophet but Angelina assured me you were just down with a bad cold. How are you doing, my boy?”

“I’m doing fine, Mr. Johnson. Angelina was right and the Prophet wrong. I did have a bad case of chills the one night and Ginny didn’t want to take any chances, considering my past history, so she sent for help from St. Mungo’s. But the story in the Prophet was quite a bit overboard in describing my condition,” Harry said with a grin.

Mr. Johnson shook his head and said,

"I wonder what those idiots are on about this time. You'd think the embarrassment of the last time would have taught them a lesson."

"They have a new editor apparently. I guess he has to make his own mistakes," Harry said.

"Quite probably. Well, anyway, it's great to see you're looking so well. Take care of yourself, Harry."

"Yes, sir. I will," Harry said as the older man hurried off on his business.

Harry opened the shop door and stepped in. There were only two customers and George was behind the counter. He looked up when he heard the door chime sound.

"Harry. You're looking pretty chipper. Or have you discovered some way to make the living dead look good?" George said with a wide smile.

"I'm feeling good, George. The cold is gone and I'm back to normal, whatever normal is," Harry said with a chuckle. "I was just telling that to your father-in-law outside."

"So what are you up to today, Harry?" George asked.

"Just doing a walk around, haven't done that in a while. Plus I promised to pick up some writing supplies for Ginny. I just wanted to stop in and say hello," Harry said.

George gave a knowing smile and wave as Harry turned and left the shop. He continued his walk until he arrived at Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop. He stepped inside and cast about looking for journal books and parchment.

"My word, it's Mr. Potter. Welcome to my shop, sir."

"Good morning, Mr. Scrivenshaft. I could use some help."

“Certainly, sir. And may I say you’re looking quite well today. Now, how may I be of assistance?” the slender wizard said.

The current proprietor of the shop was the latest in a long line of Scrivenshafts to operate the store. He had the pinched expression of someone who spent a lot of time focused on small words just a short distance away. His finger tips were permanently dyed black from ink.

“I need a couple of blank journals, some new quills and ink. My wife is taking on a writing project.”

“Ah, yes. Please come right this way. We should have everything you need.”

Harry spent the next half hour or so examining various quality journals, goose quills and inks. In the end he settled on two leather bound journals containing several hundred pages of fine, thin parchment. He also bought half a dozen new quills and a good supply of ink. Since it turned into a fairly substantial purchase with a certain amount of bulk to it, he requested they hold it aside until he returned later in the day.

His next stop was Flourish and Blotts where he skimmed the shelves and chatted with the clerk and few customers. All were pleased to see him and looking in good health. Next was Angelina’s and a look at the new baked goods arrangement. As he entered, his tall dark skinned ‘sister’ looked up from her work behind the bakery counter and she smiled wide.

“Harry, oh my goodness, it is so good to see you,” she said as she hurried out from behind the counter.

There were several customers in the store and they stood and watched with bemused smiles as the two shared a heartfelt hug. As usual Angelina then held him at arm’s length and gave him a thorough once over. Then with a long arm over his shoulder she led him to a table near the counter and had him sit while she returned to servicing her customers.

Harry sat and looked at the display counter full of breads, rolls, biscuits and a cake. The smells were very enticing.

“So, Harry,” Angelina called from behind the counter. “You’re looking pretty good considering you were practically dead last week.”

“Thanks, sis,” Harry said with a grin. “I’m feeling fine and my condition last week was greatly exaggerated. It was a bad cold and some chills, that’s all.”

Harry could see that the customers were paying close attention while trying to appear disinterested. When Angelina had finished with them she grabbed a small plate, put some biscuits on it and brought it out to Harry and then went and made two cups of tea and then joined him at the table.

“So, brother mine,” she said with an impish grin, “did we convince them?”

“Convince who of what?” Harry said with a straight face.

Angelina laughed and shook her head.

“That innocent face of yours hides a very devious mind, Mr. Potter. You know darn well what I’m talking about. You’re here in the Alley making liars out of the Prophet, again. There was a lot of talk when that article came out. A lot of very worried faces too. And here you are today looking in fine fettle nonchalantly mentioning a cold. The word will spread and once again you beat the Prophet at its own game,” she said with a smile.

Harry just smiled and shrugged. He knew Angelina wouldn’t hit him like Ginny or Fleur would for doing it. He took a bite from one of the biscuits and he closed his eyes and savored the buttery, lightly sugared taste. It was heaven.

“Good, huh, Harry?” Angelina said, watching his reaction.

“Oh, yeah. And then some. Would you put a dozen of these in a box for me to take home, please?”

“Of course, Harry. This is really turning out to be a great idea. I get a lot more customers in just for the bakery stuff and now that the weather is warming up, they grab a cone on the way out,” Angelina said.

“I’m glad it’s working out. So, have you been out to see Fleur and the baby yet?”

“Not yet, Harry. We’ve been trying to spread the visits out to give Fleur some time to rest and recover. George and I will be going out tomorrow after the shops close. Mrs. Weasley is going to make us all dinner.”

“Victoire is a real beauty, even at this early stage. Fleur was kinda mad at me at first because I wouldn’t touch her or the baby but she got over it soon enough. You can give her an extra hug for me,” he said with a smile. “Hey, by the way, are you going to be able to spend any time at the Quidditch camp in August? I know it’s a busy time for you.”

“I’ve worked it out with Charlie. One day each of the two weeks. My extra staff is more than able to handle the place for a day without me. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

They spent some more time talking about the camp and then Harry indicated he needed to be on his way. He took the box of cookies from Angelina and handed her the coins in payment. As usual she just smiled and shook her head. With a parting hug Harry was out on the street again and making his way to the Cauldron for lunch. As he passed the store front for the Prophet he stopped and looked in and when he saw the clerk behind the counter, he rapped on the window with a knuckle. The man looked up a bit startled but his eyes bugged out when he saw Harry standing there, who in turn gave the clerk a big smile and a wave. When he saw the clerk wasn’t going to respond beyond gawking, he went on his way.

He opened the portal to the back of the Cauldron and then made his way into the dining area through the back door. He looked around until he saw Hannah and waved to catch her eye.

“Harry!” she exclaimed. “How wonderful to see you. I thought you were ill.”

Harry could see the mischievous little grin on her face as she hurried over to him.

“Just a bad cold and the chills, Hannah. I’m all recovered,” he replied.

“Passing through or staying for lunch?”

“Oh, lunch for sure. I’ve built up quite an appetite,” Harry said.

Hannah led him to a table that was in plain view from just about anywhere in the Cauldron. Harry gave an inward smile and thought to himself that either he was extremely transparent or his friends and family were natural born conspirators. Hannah explained the menu for the day and then took a seat for a moment to chat with Harry.

“So you’re really doing ok, Harry?”

“Yes, Hannah. It was a cold and some chills. Nothing that bad. It looks like someone is taking a run at me. I have an idea but nothing concrete yet,” Harry said.

“So we’re going down that road again. I have to tell you, Harry, with all the garbage the Prophet used to print about you it was so hard to figure out what was going on. I’m surprised you didn’t find some way to get back at them,” she said.

“But we did, Hannah. We, well Hermione mostly, found a way to get the truth printed and once it became obvious what was going on it all fell down around them. I understand they almost went out of business readership was so low,” Harry said.

“It should be interesting to see what falls out of this latest episode once the word gets out you’ve been out and about today. Which I assume is what you had in mind all along.”

“Who? Me? I just wanted to get out and get some fresh air after being cooped up all last week,” Harry said with wide eyed innocence.

Hannah laughed and gave his arm a little slap and then took his order and hurried off to the kitchen. While he waited for his meal he looked around and as he made eye contact he would pause to smile or nod. As always the meal was excellent and as was becoming common, Harry left nothing behind. After he settled his bill and left Hannah with a hug he went back to the stationary store to collect his purchases. He made a quick stop at his house to leave the packages with Kreacher and then he Disapparated back to the Ministry. He was in his office and working on an outline of the proposed presentation for the Paris conference when Milligan popped his head in the door.

“Got a minute, Chief?”

“Sure, Milligan, come on in,” Harry said.

The tall wizard stepped in, shut the door and sat down. He looked at Harry and then said,

“I’ve been digging around the place trying to turn something up on that dragon you tangled with. What I can confirm is that it was taken down into the spooks hidey hole in pieces. What they’ve been doing with it is anyone’s guess. I’ve picked up some tidbits about them looking for information on muggle biology studies and genetic sciences but nothing specific yet,” the investigator said.

“Based on what I’ve seen about how they’ve worked in the past, my guess is that they’ll try and figure out how it was done and then do it themselves. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if we see another one of those nasty buggers flapping around again in a few years. You might want to save up your strength just in case.”

Harry was decidedly not happy about this news. The idea that someone in Mysteries might be trying to regenerate the mutated dragon was disturbing to say the least. He’d have to find a way to approach the Minister about this. He was drawn back to what Milligan was saying when he heard the words ‘Paris conference’.

“Yes. I spoke with the Director this morning. He supports us participating and he’ll run it past the Minister for final approval. I’m supposed to put some form of presentation together so why don’t you jot down some notes based on what you heard during your visit and we’ll get together Wednesday morning and draft up an outline.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll bring a pile of parchment and we’ll see how much of it we can ruin, I’m not much of a writer.”

Harry laughed because he didn’t think he was either.

“Hmm, I guess we should look around for a pile of scrap parchment and write on the unused side. We’ll work something out. I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

“Yes, sir.”

After Milligan left he sat back and thought on the idea of scrap parchment and note taking. A thought occurred to him and he smiled. He got up and let Tom know he was leaving the office for a bit. He went up to the lobby and Disapparated home. Kreacher let him in and Harry went to his study and took a box out of his desk drawer. This contained his supply of muggle money that he kept for just such occasions. He placed some notes in his pocket and went back out to the porch. After a brief walk he was standing outside a muggle stationary store.

He also looked at the store next door and had another thought but first things first. He went in and about fifteen minutes later exited with a well filled bag. He then walked into the other store. This visit lasted longer but he left empty handed but with a small smile. He dropped off his new purchases back at the house and then returned to the Ministry to finish out the day working on ideas for his presentation and pondering the idea of dragon experiments.

He returned home around six thirty and found Ginny had already returned. She greeted him with a big hug and kiss. Taking hold of his arm she led him into the kitchen where dinner was being laid out. Harry realized he was quite hungry. As they ate Harry told Ginny

about his tour of the Alley. She was grinning from ear to ear by the time he was finished.

“Oh, Harry, I wish I could have seen the look on the face of the clerk at the Prophet. But Angelina was right about you. Those beautiful green eyes behind those big glasses conceal a very complicated mind. You’ll make liars out of the Prophet without ever really confronting them. That’s brilliant,” Ginny said with admiration.

Harry just smiled and continued to demolish his dinner. After a dessert consisting of the great sugared butter cookies and tea, Harry led Ginny to his study to give her the supplies he bought. She loved the journals and the rest but looked at the material from the muggle store with a questioning look.

“It was something the Milligan said about wasting a bunch of parchment when we start drafting up a presentation I have to come up with. It got me thinking about a cheaper alternative for making notes and drafts. I used them when I was going to the muggle school before I got my letter to Hogwarts. These are note books and pens from a muggle store. Try it out,” Harry suggested.

Ginny opened one of the muggle note books and picked up one of the ball point pens. She wrote a few words and crossed one out and wrote some others. She nodded and then looked at Harry.

“Thanks, Harry. These should work out great for working things out before committing them to the parchment. For someone who isn’t so crazy about this project it was nice of you to think of this,” she said with a smile.

“I think it had more to do with you than the project, love,” Harry said with a smile.

Harry stood in the backyard of the Burrow dressed in his formal robes. He was keeping an eye on Ron who was showing definite signs of groom nerves. Harry was keeping track and Ron had asked what

time it was seven times, what was taking them so long five times and was his robe straight no fewer than eight times.

“Ron, mate, relax,” Harry said. “They’ll be out when they are ready and not a minute sooner. What’s the big deal, you have a date or something later?”

“What? Of course not, Harry. I’m just nervous and want to get going. What’s taking so long?” Ron asked.

“Six.”

“What?” Ron asked.

“Nothing, mate, nothing.”

Fifteen minutes later a signal from the window of the kitchen door told the little wizard who officiated at seemingly all wizard weddings that the bride was ready. At his prompting Ron and Harry took their places to one side. The door opened and the parents of the bride and groom hurried out to take their places on either side of the impromptu aisle. Without any accompanying music Ginny came out of the house at a slow walk, wearing a new robe bought specifically for the wedding. It was green, not the deep green of the robes she wore during her seventh year but of a shade that set off her red hair beautifully. Looking at Harry she smiled widely. She had come nearly abreast of Harry and Ron when Hermione made her appearance at the door. She looked stunning. As she had for Harry and Ginny’s wedding, her usually bushy hair had been straightened out and styled and some make-up tastefully applied. Her robe was white with no embellishments but all the more eye catching in its simplicity. Harry could hear Ron’s sharp intake of breath.

It was also painfully obvious that Hermione was just as nervous, if not more so, than Ron. Her face was flushed and her hands trembled slightly. She maintained a slow step but she was keeping her eyes firmly fixed straight ahead. Harry could only marvel at how the usually self confident young woman could be having such a case of nerves but out of nowhere came the memory of how nervous she had become when it was time to approach the sorting hat that first

evening at Hogwarts. He continued to watch her approach and when she came up even with Ron they all turned to face the little wizard. When it came time to recite the vows Ron and Hermione faced each other, holding each other's hands. As they repeated the words the nervousness was clearly evident in their voices but they made their way through without mishap. On cue, Harry produced the two plain gold bands and the bride and groom made the exchange. And then with a kiss it was over, they were now Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Weasley.

Harry and Ginny shared a group hug with the newly married couple while the mothers-in-law shared a rather weepy hug of their own. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Granger shook hands and the wedding party took their leave of the wizard minister and retired to the kitchen for some celebratory snacks and beverages. Both Ron and Hermione looked extremely relieved. Harry could only shake his head.

"You know, you two have been through so many life threatening situations before, I can't believe that that small ceremony had you so wound up."

"What can I say, mate? I've never been much good at performing in public and it is a pretty big step to take," Ron said as he sat holding Hermione's hand.

"Yes, Harry. Remember what I told you the other day," Hermione said.

"Yeah, you told me you were deathly afraid of being in front of a big crowd. Today was what, four people?" Harry replied with a crooked smile.

"Yes, four very important people, Harry. My parents and my very soon to be in-laws. I was terrified that I'd make a fool of myself like falling down or messing up the vows. I still don't know how you can be up in front of all those people and not throw up," she said, a look of panic and revulsion on her face.

"Well, I guess that wrecks that idea then," Harry said mournfully.

"What idea was that?" Ginny asked.

“I was going to suggest Hermione come with me to the conference in Paris later this summer so she could give a presentation on her work revamping the laws dealing with the other magical races. Oh well,” he said with a perfectly straight face.

Hermione’s eyes went wide and he could see Ron trying to hold back a laugh. Ginny was giving Harry one of her ‘I know you’re kidding me’ looks and he responded with a slow wink exactly like he had when he and Ginny had gone face to face when he revealed his dragon self. She began to giggle and then laugh followed by Ron and then finally Hermione reached over and slapped his arm and laughed herself.

They spent a pleasant afternoon relaxing and enjoying the refreshments and each other’s company. It was revealed that for the time being Ron and Hermione were going to take the top floor of a three story stone house on the other side of Ottery St. Catchpole. The landlord was the elderly daughter of a squib who was friendly to magical folk. The party at the Burrow was to be in three weeks which would allow Abigail to be present as she was due to arrive home on Wednesday of the week upcoming. Harry was already committed to having Abigail appear at the Ministry the very next day.

As the little party wound down and everyone prepared to leave for their respective homes there were many hugs and handshakes but probably the most significant was between Harry and Hermione. She had pulled him down and had her arms around his shoulders and her mouth near his ear so she could whisper to him. She said,

“I know you’d never admit to it in public, Harry, and most likely not even in private or to yourself, but we all owe you so much for the happiness we’ve been able to enjoy and will be able to in the future. We all love you, Harry, more than you could possibly imagine.”

When they pulled apart a little both had tears streaming down their faces. Hermione brushed the tears off his cheeks and then kissed him lightly. Ron had a little smile on his face and with a final handshake they went their separate ways. Separate but inseparable. Ginny hooked Harry’s arm in his and watched as the couple got into the back of the Grangers car for the short drive to their new home. She then looked up at Harry and pulled him down to kiss his cheek.

“Let’s go home, sweetheart,” she said in that tone of voice that always made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

He smiled wide and nodded.

Right on time in the evening of the following Wednesday, Harry was standing on the platform of gate nine and three quarters as the Hogwarts expressed chuffed to a halt with a billow of steam. Harry kept his eye on the doors of the coach he figured was where the fourth years were riding. It took about five minutes but the diminutive figure in dark robes and darker hair hurried down the steps to the platform. She caught sight of Harry and rushed through the crowd to meet him. As she flung her arms around him she said,

“Oh, Harry, it’s so good to be home.”

“It’s good to have you home, little one. Let’s collect your luggage and get going, Ginny should be home soon and she’ll be anxious to see you.”

Abigail smiled at Harry and nodded. They made their way to the baggage coach and after a brief wait were able to collect her trunk. Harry placed it on the trolley he had secured and they made their way through the crowd. Abigail had relinquished her borrowed owl as Harry indicated that they would look into one of her own this summer. As usual a ministry sedan was waiting and in a matter of moments they were on their way smoothly through the traffic. Shortly they arrived at the house on Grimmauld Place and Abigail only made it two steps into the house before she was swept up in Ginny’s embrace.

“It’s so good to have you home, sweetheart,” Ginny said once they released each other.

“I’m so glad to be here. I love school but it’s really nice to be home for the summer,” she said breathlessly.

“Well, we have dinner waiting so why don’t we go into the kitchen while Kreacher moves your trunk to your room. We can unpack after

we eat,” Ginny said, casting a knowing look over Abigail’s head to Harry.

“Hmm, great, I’m starving,” Abigail said.

The seated themselves at the table and Harry began serving.

“So, did the year end well for you, Abigail?” Ginny asked.

“Mmmm Hmmm,” she began. “My exams turned out great and all my professors are pleased with how well I’m doing. They figure I shouldn’t have any trouble with my OWLs next year. Once the weather warmed up I was able to get more practice in on my broom so I should be able to show you some real improvement over last year. I’m going to miss Norbie though. He and I got pretty close this year. He’s such a big sweetie,” she said and then suddenly stiffened. “Oh, gee, I’m sorry, Harry, I’m supposed to give you this from Hagrid.”

She reached into her robe which she was still wearing and pulled out a wrinkled piece of parchment. Harry took it and unfolded it. In Hagrid’s scratchy scrawl was the following:

Cheers Harry,

If you get the chance to come up this summer make sure you drop by the hut for a chat.

Hagrid.

“What is it, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“He wants me to come up for a chat when I can. He’d probably say it if it was about the Centaurs but maybe he’s heard something he thinks I should know. I’ll try and go up next week. I could use a visit with the Heads and Neville as well. It’s been a bad spring that way. I feel a little out of touch.”

Ginny just nodded. She thought about how much Harry was involved in and she was hoping once her commitment to the Harpies’ was up she’d be able to help him with things. They finished dinner giving

Abigail a description of Ron and Hermione's wedding. She was looking forward to the party and seeing all her friends and 'family'. Once dinner was finished they got up and Ginny said,

"Ok, young lady, let's go get you unpacked. Why don't you go up and we'll be there in a minute."

"Ok, Ginny," Abigail said and she hurried forward and Harry and Ginny followed at a deliberately slow pace.

They could hear her bound up the first flight of stairs and run down the hall for the second. They proceeded up the stairs themselves and were very near the top when they heard what passed for a loud scream from Abigail. They stood in the middle of the corridor near their room and heard the second scream and then the sound of footsteps coming back toward the top of the second stairway. The footsteps were followed by the sound of 'omigod, omigod, omigod,' repeatedly until they saw a dark haired blur streak towards them and launch directly into Harry's arms. From the vicinity of his chest he heard a repetition of 'thank you's.

"What's all this about, little one?" Harry said seriously.

"You know and I know you know," Abigail said as her feet touched the floor again and she began tugging them back in the direction she had just come from.

Her eyes were wide and bright and misty. Harry and Ginny just smiled and followed in the wake of their little tugboat. When they entered through the still open door of her room they stood and looked as she let go of their hands and slowly walked in. What had caused all the commotion was the result of Harry's side trip to the other store next to the muggle stationary store. In one corner was an easel with a blank canvas. Against the wall nearby was an assortment of blank canvases of various sizes. Against the other wall nearby was a small table/desk that was similar to what used to be part of every engineering office before computers took over. The desk top tilted and along the top was a rack that contained an assortment of colored pencils and markers as well as charcoal sticks. A large artist sketch pad was laid on the table top.

She slowly walked up to it and ran her hands reverently across the smooth polished wood. She opened the drawers and found more drawing supplies and equipment. One drawer contained the paint tubes for use on the canvases as well as a palette and an assortment of brushes. She stood with her back to Harry and Ginny for a few moments as she took it all in. Then she turned to them with tears streaming down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the back of her hand and then walked over to stand directly in front of Harry. She took his right hand in both of hers and looked up at him.

“Thank you so much, Harry. But why?” she asked.

It wasn't what he was expecting but he did have an answer. He picked her up and sat her on the edge of her bed and sat down next to her. Ginny sat on her other side and placed an arm around her shoulders.

“For several reasons, little one. First and most important because I, we, love you and it makes us happy to see you so happy. Second, you have a great talent and such talent should be encouraged to grow. And because I do intend to have you work with me and the Aurors and I'm afraid that there will be times when you will see things that are going to be pretty unpleasant. I wanted you to have this so you'd have a place to come to and forget about those things and be able to create beauty to replace the ugliness.”

She looked up at him and smiled and put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. While she leaned into him with her head on his shoulder he brought up the matter of her schooling.

“Speaking of you coming to work for me, I really would prefer that you finish your schooling, Abigail. There is still a lot that you could learn that would be a benefit. You could take part in the intern program after your sixth year and I think I could work out a way that you could help with investigations while you're still at school. I'd like you to think about it and we can discuss it during the summer. Ok?”

She pulled her head back and looked up at him and remained silent for a while. Then she said,

“Ok, Harry, I’ll think about it but maybe you’re right. When I said that before it was mostly because I was in a hurry to want to help you with those smugglers and things but you seemed to have wrapped that up pretty much. If we can work it out that I can help you and still go to school that might be best. There is so much to learn,” she said quietly.

Harry looked over at Ginny and said,

“I always knew she was a very smart girl. And smart girl,” Harry continued as he looked back down at her, “you’re coming with me to the Ministry tomorrow so don’t stay up late. It will be an early day.”

“Ok, Harry, I can’t wait.”

He kissed her on the head and then stood up and left Ginny and Abigail to the task of unpacking the trunk. Kreacher was standing outside the door to take whatever needed washing down to the laundry room. When Ginny came looking for him he was in his study working his way through an rather old and heavily worded tome on magic. He was hoping it might contain some more information on the murky world of animagic. He looked up to see Ginny looking at him with an odd, but soft, look on her face.

She walked over to stand in front of him and she gently took the book out of his hands and placed it on his desk. She sat on his lap and put her arms around her shoulders and pulled his head close.

“That was a wonderfully thoughtful thing you did for her, Harry. She’s absolutely floating around her room. In fact, I think she’s suffering from a bit of overload. She can’t figure out what she wants to do first.”

“Everyone needs a hobby, Gin, it’s good therapy.”

“What about you, Harry, what’s your hobby? I have my writing, Abigail her art, what about you?” Ginny asked.

“I thought that was obvious, Gin. Magic.”

“Magic, Harry? That’s a hobby? It’s your work, your life, how could it be your hobby?” she asked.

“You are right, Ginny. It is my life. It saved me from a horrible life by giving me an alternative to the Dursleys. It gave me a sense of accomplishment with flying and playing Quidditch and now it gives me the chance to do a lot of good for a lot of people. But when I went back for my seventh year, there was so much I hadn’t known about and it became more than just something to learn to keep me alive. It’s so fascinating. All those books that Professor Dumbledore suggested have opened up a whole world that even most wizards and witches don’t know about. And now this business with the dragon. I don’t know, maybe it’s like a musician that plays a certain kind of music for a living but also finds lots of other music interesting and plays and learns for the enjoyment of it.”

When he stopped Ginny leaned back so she could look into those deep green eyes and she silently marveled at what there was hidden behind them. She leaned in and kissed him warmly. Then she slid off his lap and tugged on his hand and led him from the study to their room. They both had an early day tomorrow but she wanted an early start to their night.

The following morning, after a good breakfast and bidding Ginny good bye for the day, Harry and Abigail walked to the Ministry and took the phonebox elevator to the lobby. Abigail had left her wand at home and so they skipped registration and went straight to his office. When they arrived Harry found a message on his desk that requested his presence in the Minister’s office and he should bring Miss Westwood along. They exchanged looks that clearly said, ‘I have no idea’ and then proceeded up to the Minister’s office suite.

“You can go right in, Mr. Potter,” the secretary said.

“Thank you,” he replied and then knocked on the door.

“Yes?” came the deep voice.

“Harry Potter and Abigail Westwood to see you, sir,” Harry responded.

“Come in, Harry, come in.”

Harry swung the door open and he let Abigail precede him into the room. The Minister rose and came around the big desk with a smile.

“Abigail, this is Minister Shacklebolt,” Harry said by way of introduction.

“Hello, sir,” Abigail said in her quiet voice as she looked up at the Minister who stood towering over her.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Miss Westwood and please, don’t be nervous.”

“Abigail is naturally very soft spoken, sir,” Harry offered in explanation.

“I see. Well, Miss Westwood, please, sit down here and make yourself comfortable,” the Minister said and then he looked to Harry. “Actually, Harry, it’s really Miss Westwood that I wanted to meet and talk to you about.”

“Yes, sir?” Harry asked.

The Minister took his seat behind the desk and looked across at the two of them.

“Yes, Harry. First, I wanted the chance to meet her and thank her after all the help she provided with the investigation on the smugglers and so forth. Secondly, I’d like to talk to her about accepting a commission from the Ministry.”

“A commission, sir?” Abigail said.

“Yes, Miss Westwood. I’ve had the opportunity to see some samples of your art work and it is very impressive. The work you did at the ice cream shop in Diagon Alley and Arthur Weasley brought in the portrait you gave him and his wife for Christmas and they are all quite amazing.”

"Thank you, sir," she said breathlessly.

"As you are probably aware, Miss Westwood, we've been working very hard here at the Ministry trying to change the way the magic community has done things for a long, long time. One of those is how we witches and wizards relate to the other magical races. As Harry can tell you there used to be a statue, a fountain really, in the lobby that was a very good illustration of the way we thought about that relationship in the past. A witch and wizard surrounded by a Centaur, a Goblin and a house elf, all looking at the two humans with looks of adoration. Not exactly an accurate depiction," the Minister said wryly. "If nothing else the fight that Harry and his friends had here that one night helped to rid us of that ridiculous piece of stone. What I would like you to consider, Miss Westwood is taking on the task of creating a mural on the wall in the lobby near where the statue once stood that more accurately reflects that true nature of our place in the magical world, shared with these other sentient races. Would you be interested?"

"I need to see the wall and how big it would be. If I think I can do it this summer, I will," Abigail said.

"Excellent. What do you say we go to the lobby and have a look?" the Minister asked.

"Yes, sir," Abigail said.

They all rose and Abigail walked alongside the Minister once they exited his office. Harry trailed along behind with a bemused smile on his face. He could see how the Minister dwarfed his ward but Abigail apparently wasn't showing any signs of being intimidated by his size. Anyone walking past couldn't help but look at the mismatched pair as they made their way to the lobby. The fireplaces that linked the Ministry to the Floo network took up a large amount of the wall space but there was still a fairly large area that was unencumbered.

"Here we are, Miss Westwood. I thought that if we put new paint on this section of wall it would be a fine space for a mural. Any visitor arriving or leaving would be able see it. What do you think?"

"I think it would be very nice, sir," she said quietly. "It seems though that it would be pretty busy in here most of the time. That might be a distraction and make it hard to concentrate."

"I think we might be able to deal with that, Miss Westwood. We can put a screen around the area," the Minister replied

"That might work. It might also be an idea to do it on some large individual canvases and then mount them side by side on the wall. That way it could be sort of a surprise and make a bigger statement," Abigail said thoughtfully.

"Statement?" the Minister asked.

"Yes, sir. Isn't that what you wanted to do? Make a statement about the new way of thinking that you're trying to get the magical community to consider."

The Minister looked over at Harry with an odd look on his face.

"You are still considering having this young lady come to work here at the Ministry, aren't you, Harry?"

"Yes, sir. We discussed it last night. I still want her to finish a full seven years at Hogwarts but I'm going to work on a way to have her work on things here while still at school," Harry said.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I can only imagine how valuable an asset she could be to us here," Shacklebolt said and then turned back to look at Abigail. "How about we try this, Miss Westwood? Would you sketch up a few ideas on how you would portray the idea I suggested and bring them to me and we'll go from there?"

"Yes, sir, I can do that. Harry set up a complete art studio in my room so I'll be able to do something pretty quickly."

"Well done, Harry, and thank you, Miss Westwood," the Minister said with a smile.

"You're welcome, sir and um, Mr. Minister, you can call me Abigail if you'd like."

"Thank you, Abigail, I will," he said with a big smile. "Ok, Harry, I'll let you get to work. I'm sure there are quite a few people that would like to see Abigail."

"Yes, sir, and some of them can get quite cranky," Harry said with a wry smile.

The Minister smiled and with a wave headed back to his office. Harry smiled at Abigail and with his arm around her shoulder led her to his office. Abigail sat down in one of Harry's guest chairs and looked at him as he sat down at his desk.

"So, who first, little one?" Harry asked.

"I think I'd like to see the Aurors first. I haven't seen them since last summer."

"Ok, I imagine quite a few are probably in their break room right now so..." Harry was saying when a familiar figure appeared in the doorway.

"Word was we had a special visitor this morning, Chief, and I see the word was right, for once," said Milligan. "Hello, Miss Abigail."

"Hi, Mr. Milligan. How have you been?" she asked with a smile.

"The Chief has been keeping me busy. I believe there are some people that would like to say hello. Do you mind, sir?"

"Not at all, we were just discussing that very thing. You're saving me a trip down to the break room. Just have her back in time for lunch," Harry said.

"Will do, sir," Milligan said. "Ma'am, if you would do me the honor?"

Abigail jumped up and with a wave and smile to Harry walked out with the lanky Auror. Harry could only smile and shake his head.

It was the beginning of a busy few days for Abigail. That night she spent the time between dinner and bedtime sketching ideas for the Ministry's commission. The next day she took the floo network to the Burrow and then from there to Shell Cottage with Mrs. Weasley to visit Fleur and the baby. She brought along a sketch pad and pencils and by the time she was ready to come home Fleur had a beautiful pencil rendering of her and the baby. Abigail was amazed at how strong those slender arms were when she got a farewell hug before she went home.

She returned on Friday to the Ministry to show Kingsley Shacklebolt her idea sketches. He liked what he saw but they spent over an hour discussing possible variations and embellishments until they settled on a design. It was agreed that she would do the work on large individual canvases that would then be revealed as a completed work as she had suggested. They also agreed to a fee, with Harry helping negotiate. While not exorbitant it was significant. Harry took her back to the art store to arrange for the canvases. It appeared that the young artist was in for a very busy, interesting summer.

Harry's Future, Part 26

Harry lounged in the battered old chaise lounge that had been a daily fixture during the momentous summer of his recuperation after the defeat of Voldemort. This evening he was staring up into the summer night sky. The reception for Hermione and Ron for the magical side of the family had pretty much wound down and Harry was taking the opportunity to relax. The past couple of weeks had been pretty hectic and he was glad for the dark starry night and the warm breeze.

One of the more significant events was his trip up to Hogwarts after receiving the rather direct yet seemingly cryptic note that Hagrid had sent to him by way of Abigail when she returned for the summer. He made arrangements to visit the Heads office to discuss what headway he was making into the study of animagic and how it pertained to his rather unique situation. He was finding a reasonable amount of information but precious little touched directly on his case. He was still resisting any suggestion of experimentation but his resolve was starting to weaken. The idea of investigating under controlled conditions instead of dealing with some spontaneous disaster was starting to make some sense.

He then made a side trip to the greenhouse that Neville and Professor Sprout were upgrading for use in their work in the area of medicinal herbology, particularly with the exotic plants that Neville had been collecting on his field trips. It had been an unexpectedly emotional, yet gratifying experience. When Harry had first arrived Neville had greeted him excitedly.

"Harry," Neville called out as he saw him approaching. "It's great to see you. Come in and see what we've been doing with your help."

The young herbologist gave Harry a tour showing him the special growing tables, watering and temperature control systems, as well as a lab area that allowed for the controlled planting, harvesting and hybridization experiments.

"This is amazing, Neville. I can't believe you got all this done so fast," Harry said in true astonishment.

“Well, we had a lot of it started but your help allowed us to get it all set up and running,” his friend said with a big smile. “The extra galleons you put in allowed us to upgrade the lab equipment and that will be a big boost later on. Thanks for that, Harry.”

“No problem, mate. I’m only too happy to help. In fact, why don’t you and Professor Sprout work up some numbers on what the yearly expenses are going to be. I’ll see what we might be able to work out to keep it all running so you don’t have to go begging every year,” Harry said with a small grin.

“Wow, that would be great. I guess what Professor Sprout and I decided to do was the right idea after all,” Neville said with a grin.

“What do you mean, Nev?” Harry asked.

“We haven’t put it up yet but this is what I mean,” Neville said as he pointed at a cloth covered object on a nearby table. “Go ahead, Harry, uncover it.”

Harry walked over to the table and pulled the cloth aside. Underneath was a bronze plaque that read as follows,

The Lily and James Potter

Medicinal Herbology

Research Center

“We thought about naming it after you, Harry, since you put the most into it but we knew you wouldn’t want that so we figured this was the next best thing. We hope you like it.”

Harry couldn’t answer. He could barely see. He looked up and over to his friend but all he saw was a blur as the tears obscured his vision. He took off his glasses and wiped the tears away with his hand and then put them back on. He took a step toward his second oldest friend and reached out to take his hand and then pulled him into a crushing embrace. When he let Neville go he smiled once and then turned and walked out.

He wasn't sure why he was so emotional but just seeing his parents' name like that threatened to overwhelm him. Apparently some wounds still hadn't healed very well. He walked slowly on his way down to Hagrid's hut to collect his thoughts and get his emotions under control. He was maybe a hundred yards away when the booming bark of the now adult Norbie echoed across the distance. The big dog came bounding up the path towards Harry. His body having bulked out, he looked as if he was even bigger than Fang had been.

As the dog drew closer Harry stood fast but there was no collision. Hagrid had done his duty with training Norbie and the big Mastiff came to a halt just in front of Harry, tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth.

"Hello, Norbie. How are you, big fella?" Harry asked. "Sorry, but Abigail isn't with me today," he added, reaching out to scratch the big head between the ears.

Norbie didn't seem to mind as long as the scratching continued. Then Harry gave him a final pat on the head and continued on towards the hut. Norbie walked alongside for a few paces and then bolted, leaving Harry to catch up in his own time. As Harry neared the stone cottage the enormous figure of Hagrid appeared in the doorway.

"Harry, good to see ya. I didn't think you'd be comin' so soon when I sent the note with young Abigail," Hagrid said, his smile mostly hidden by his bushy beard.

"Well, it reminded me that I hadn't been up in a while and I had some other business so here I am. How have you been?" Harry asked.

"Doin' pretty well for an old man, if'n I do say so meself," he said with a laugh. "Come on in and sit a spell."

Harry walked into one of the favorite places in his life. While not a place like the Burrow, it was such an integral piece of his life at Hogwarts he couldn't imagine a world without it. He took a seat in one of the overlarge chairs across from Hagrid's truly enormous one.

Norbie laid on the floor between them, taking up much of the available space.

“Abigail tells me that she and Norbie have gotten to be pretty close friends,” Harry said.

“Oh, aye, Harry. Ever since that day them thugs tried ta snatch her he’s always right there next ta her when she’s down this way. Quite a sight. Now that he’s full grown she could probably ride ‘em like a pony,” Hagrid said with a laugh.

“So, Hagrid, were you just looking for a friendly visit or was there something more that you wanted to talk to me about,” Harry asked.

“Summat odd going on in the forest, Harry and I thought mebbe you might know summat about it,” Hagrid said, suddenly all business.

“What might that be?”

“I gets ta still talk ta the Centaurs now and agin, Harry, and they’ve been awful serious like fer a while now. Sometimes I hear ‘em talkin’ and I know they be talkin’ about ya Harry but they don’t use yer name no more. They only call ya Serpent King now Harry, did ya know that?”

Harry nodded and said,

“The last time I was there to see them, the time they asked you to leave me alone with them, they called me that. Do you know what it means?” Harry asked.

“The Centaurs refer ta dragons as Serpent Kings, Harry, but when they say it about ya it’s always ‘the’ Serpent King, like the King of the dragons.”

“Maybe because I killed that last dragon?” Harry asked edgily.

“I don’t think so, Harry, that was always the Serpent Slayer,” Hagrid said his dark eyes very penetrating as they regarded Harry.

Harry leaned back in his chair and looked up at Hagrid. The half giant had been his friend a long time and was the one that helped get him to Hogwarts for the first time. He had always been there when he needed him and he was one of the few people he thought he could trust absolutely.

“Hagrid. Are you my friend?”

“Harry! How could ya ask that? O’ course I’m yer friend.”

“Would you ever do anything to break trust with me?” Harry asked quietly.

“What’re ya goin’ on about, Harry? With all we’ve been through together? I’d no sooner do summat like that then become a Death Eater.”

“Hagrid. I’m going to share a secret with you that I’ve only shared with my family and Professors’ McGonagall and Dumbledore. I had to tell the Minister as well. But I think the Centaurs know about it too, although I don’t know how.”

“Alright, Harry. I’d never tell someone a secret, well there was that time with the Sorcerer’s Stone but ya tricked me outta that one. What is it, Harry?” Hagrid asked.

Harry took a deep breath and said,

“I’m an animagus, Hagrid, and my other self is a dragon.”

Hagrid looked at Harry and scowled a bit. Then he said,

“What? Ya mean like a man sized one?”

“No, Hagrid, like a full sized one, in fact a bigger one then anyone has seen before,” Harry said flatly.

Hagrid sat in silence for a few moments and then shook his large head. He neither smiled nor showed any sign that he thought this was such a wonderful thing which was odd considering his attraction to

large dangerous creatures. He stood up and went to the big iron stove and poured some hot water into a tea kettle and brought it over to put on the table near where they sat. He poured some tea into the large mug he used and a much smaller one that he kept for visitors. Then he sat down again.

"It makes sense it does, Harry, now. From what I been able ta understand of what the Centaurs have been goin' on about, they think you have a big fight comin' up in the future. They talk about the Serpent King fightin' evil kin. Summat like you fought before, I'd reckon," Hagrid said.

Harry looked at his friend and nodded, then said,

"We've been picking up some information about the spooks in Mysteries trying to duplicate that mutated dragon. I wonder if it's going to come from there or from some other place. I appreciate the forewarning, Hagrid. I'll keep my eyes open."

"It's an amazin' thing, Harry. How did ya do it? It took yer dad and his friends years ta work it out. Did ya not think ya could tell me about it?" Hagrid said, his voice sounding a little hurt.

"It wasn't like my dad, Hagrid. It happened all by itself," Harry said.

He told what had happened in the manor house in Romania and then with Professor McGonagall at the Quidditch stadium and then at the Burrow with his family. He told Hagrid of his search for information from various old books and his fear of experimenting with how it all worked.

"I don't know much about it meself, Harry. But I know I wish I had been there ta see it happen, just once," Hagrid said wistfully.

Harry looked around and then back at Hagrid.

"Sorry, Hagrid, but if I did it here you'd lose your home. Like I said, I get pretty big."

“Ya never leave things dull fer long, Harry,” Hagrid said with a chuckle.

Harry looked at his friend, his head tilted to one side and squinting slightly. Then he said,

“It looked like there aren’t a lot of people around the school today, Hagrid.”

“No, Harry, just me and a coupla the Professors. Most ever’one is on holidays and won’t be back fer a month or more,” Hagrid replied, a note of question in his voice.

“Maybe it would be a good day to go look at the Quidditch stadium and make sure everything will be set for the camp in August,” Harry said matter-of-factly.

“If’n ya want ta, Harry.”

“I think you might want to leave Norbie here though.”

Hagrid just nodded and said,

“Stay here, Norbie, be a good fella.”

Hagrid and Harry made their way across the grounds past the castle and down the path to the stadium. They walked into the entrance tunnel and Harry waved his wand to shut and lock the doors. Hagrid said nothing. They walked onto the grass of the pitch and stood and looked around.

“Grass looks good and green,” Harry said nonchalantly.

“Surprised that it’s as good as it’s been, Harry. We had near ta no snow this winter. ‘twas cold but dry. Some good rain this spring,” Hagrid was saying.

While Hagrid talked, Harry walked out into the middle of the pitch. He bent down as if to examine the grass. Hagrid had turned looking up into the stands. He was about to say something to Harry over his

shoulder but he stopped. It seemed that the stadium was suddenly much more crowded. He did a slow turn and found himself looking into the face of an enormous dark green dragon, the emerald green eyes regarding him intently. Hagrid did his best to say something but nothing came out. He turned his head to try and see the full length of the dragon. When he brought his eyes back to Harry's the awestruck look had turned into a huge smile, his dark eyes twinkling.

"'Cor blimey, Harry. This is a amazin'. I mean I believed ya when ya said it but ta see it right in fronta ya is...is...just amazin'," Hagrid said. "And ya can fly and breathe fire and all that?"

The big head nodded and then waved this way and that as if to see if anyone was looking. The dragon pointed its muzzle down toward the far end of the pitch and gave a little cough. A short lance of fire perhaps a dozen yards long flared and then winked out. The head swung back around to regard Hagrid and then with casual slowness Harry winked. Hagrid began to laugh and clapped his hands. As Harry watched him, Hagrid began to walk along his side then disappeared around the end of his tail to come up along the other side. Harry swung his head to watch until Hagrid came around the front to stop where he had started.

"Well, Harry, my 'sperience is sketchy but yer certainly the biggest I've come across, seeing or hearing of. Charlie Weasley musta been over the moon when he saw ya. Thank ya fer showin' me, Harry. Thank ya."

Then in the space of two heartbeats, Harry was standing in the center of the pitch looking across the grass at his friend. He began walking to close the distance while Hagrid stood there smiling.

"No need to thank me, Hagrid. After all you've done for me over the years, I owed you this, at least."

The two began to walk out of the stadium and Hagrid said,

"I noticed it looked like ya show a little of the scars on yer left side, Harry. Sort of a discolorin' of the scales on yer left legs."

"I guess some things transfer through the change, like eye color," Harry said. "Hagrid, while I've got you here have you ever heard the Centaurs refer to someone as the 'lost one'?"

"Aye, Harry. Whenever they banish someone from the herd they don't use their name no more. They calls 'em the 'lost one'. Why?"

"The elder Centaur I was speaking with commented about 'the lost one' having seen something about me that might have been a hint about the dragon thing."

"He was most likely talking about Firenze. He's the only one who's been banished in a while or woulda known ya," Hagrid said.

Harry simply nodded. He took his leave of Hagrid shortly after and went home.

As Harry sat in the chaise lounge in the backyard of the Burrow he thought more on that day at Hogwarts. He had received the warning that the Centaurs may or may not have intended him to hear. He had seen his parents honored and he shared a secret with an old friend. As he looked into the sky he wondered where the signs pointed and what was waiting for him in the future.

The previous weeks had also contained some fairly mundane matters. The sixth year intern, Reggie Phillips, had reported for duty and Harry put him to work with Maxwell helping him sort out duty rosters and the beginnings of the training program that the Patrollers Muntab wanted would have to go through. This would put the young wizard in touch with several different Auror functions as well as coordinating with the Testing division since they had agreed to help craft the plan.

Harry had also been working with Milligan on the presentation that Harry was going to be giving at the conference now scheduled for the third week of July. As predicted they made scrap of a fair pile of already scrapped parchment sheets as they struggled to come up with a coherent story of events weaving the challenge of reorganizing the Law Enforcement Section while at the same time conducting the investigation of the smugglers and subsequent widespread conspiracy. With some help from Tom Medford, Hermione and Ginny

they were able to wrestle it into something Harry felt comfortable putting in front of an international audience. When asked why he didn't just approach it like he did one of his normal lectures he stared at Ginny for a moment and said,

"Because I'm not going to be talking to a bunch of students, Ginny. These people know a lot more about doing this job than I do. I could very well make a complete fool of myself if I'm not careful."

She just rolled her eyes, shook her head and dropped the subject entirely. Ginny had been spending quite a bit of time working on her 'Harry' project as it had come to be known. Following Harry's example of carrying a notebook and pencil stub, Ginny used every opportunity to ask someone questions about Harry and the answer would then be scribbled down and added to a growing pile of anecdotes. This very day she had circulated among the party guests talking and scribbling. Harry was half tempted to 'have words' with his brother-in-law Bill for starting the whole thing. He wouldn't of course since the new father had been floating around the party even though he was there alone. The baby was still too young to be traveling by the usual methods.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a familiar and welcome voice.

"Budge up there, will you, Harry," Ginny said. "I've been on my feet all day."

Harry shifted on the chaise lounge and Ginny sat down by his legs looking at him. She looked tired but satisfied.

"So, how's the search going?" Harry asked.

"Search?"

Harry tapped her notebook, still held in her two hands.

"Oh, great. I'm getting lots of bits and pieces. I figure that's the best way to start and then I'll start organizing it. A couple of my aunts and uncles knew your dad and his folks so I was getting some details there. Which reminded me of something. When we were on our

honeymoon, you mentioned something about the house in Godric's Hollow. How come we haven't been out to see it like you wanted to?" Ginny asked.

"Well, for one thing," Harry began, "there always seemed like there was something else that needed to be done. The other is that I didn't get it quite right when I said the house was the place where generations of Potters grew up. It seems that Godric's Hollow has been our hometown for centuries but I found out that there have been several different houses used. The one that my dad grew up in was only a recent one. Apparently my grandfather had moved away from the Hollow when he was younger and came back not to long before my dad was born. So maybe it's better that we leave the house the way it is. A reminder of what could happen if we don't keep a watchful eye on things."

He looked over at his young wife.

"I still think we should go see it but that's all. And I still want to move out of London but now we'll have to look for something else. Maybe a bit of land where we can build our own house. Start our own legacy," Harry said thoughtfully.

"That sounds like an interesting idea, Harry. But won't that be kind of expensive?" Ginny said.

Harry smiled and held out his hand in a gesture that Ginny recognized as an invitation to cuddle up with her husband, which she gladly accepted. As she nestled in next to him Harry wrapped her in his arms and brought his cheek to rest on the top of her head.

"I wasn't thinking of anything too big, Gin, just something comfortable enough for a family with, I don't know, two or three kids," Harry said.

"Three, Harry. And don't forget there's Abigail and we'd need some space for the occasional overnight guest. I have a feeling there is going to be lots of that over time," she said.

"I guess that's true. But anyway it's still not going to be too bad. I know I haven't shown you the state of our finances and I really should

and I will but for now you should know that what I'm talking about is in the millions, Gin," Harry said quietly.

Her head came up and she looked at him, her eyes wide.

"Are you serious, Harry?"

"Very. That day we went to Diagon Alley and Gringotts when I was recovering I got one of the biggest shocks of my life. They showed me what I inherited from Sirius who got everything from the Black family. They must have been one of the richest families in the magical community. Business investments, real estate. I had Gringotts do some checking and it looks like they were involved in some of the more unpleasant sides of muggle dealings in the past as well. The slave trade, smuggling contraband of various types. It doesn't surprise me that Sirius felt the way he did about what he was left with. That's why I'm determined to do something good with the money, Gin. It started with Diagon Alley and then the Burrow but now I want to help Neville and Professor Sprout with their work on medicinal plants. Once they tell me what they need to operate every year I'm going to set aside a portion of the Black money to provide ongoing funding. In fact I should remind Neville of that before he leaves tonight. I have some other ideas and of course if you have any I'd be glad to hear them."

Ginny had been watching Harry's face as he explained it all to her. His expression wasn't somber or sad, but firmly resolute, as if this too was part of his unasked for but fully accepted mission in life. She reached out and laid her hand along the side of his face.

"I'd be happy to help you with this, Harry. It's a wonderful thing you have planned," she said as she leaned forward to give her husband a kiss.

But their lips never met. As Ginny shifted her weight the aged chaise lounge finally succumbed and collapsed under them. They both let out a shout that attracted the attention of the party goers, a number of whom rushed over to see what the matter was. They found the young couple sprawled on the ground, laughing hysterically. Harry and

Ginny were offered hands up and as they stood there still laughing, brushing each other off Hermione took out her wand and said,

“Reparo” and the chair reassembled itself but still looked ready to fall apart at any moment.

“Are you children alright?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“We’re fine, Mum,” Ginny answered. “It was a short drop and Harry broke my fall. You know, Mum, I think it’s time you replaced these chairs.”

“Hey, hold on there. This chair and I have a lot of history,” Harry said. “You can’t get rid of it.”

“I’ll tell you what, Harry, we’ll get new chairs for the yard and we’ll give this one to you, how does that sound, dear?” Mrs. Weasley said.

“That sounds great, Mum. Thanks,” Harry replied as they all made their way back towards the rest of the party goers while the road signs continued to shine in the night sky.

“So, are we agreed?” Harry asked.

He was sitting across from Neville and Professor Sprout in her small office attached to one of the green houses. He looked at his friend and his former teacher, his hand resting on an official looking piece of parchment.

“Harry, are you sure about this?” Neville asked.

“Of course I am, Nev. Didn’t we have this discussion already?” Harry said with a small grin.

“Well, yeah, Harry but to see it all down on paper like that with signatures and seals, it’s...” the serious young wizard faltered to a stop.

The parchment in question was the agreement that a sum of money would be put aside in a special account at Gringotts that would be an endowment for the work that Neville and Professor Sprout were undertaking. It listed those two as having authority to draw on the money for operating expenses and a limited amount each year for capital improvements. For anything beyond that approval of the trustees would be required. These were listed as Harry, Ginny and Hermione. The last was added when she overheard what was being said at the tail end of her and Ron's party at the Burrow and she then made a few suggestions about how to organize the trust so it was decided to enlist her aid on the organization side.

"Nev, listen to me. You know that most of my fortune is derived from what I inherited from my godfather. You can just imagine where and how the Blacks got most of their money. At least this way I know that a good portion of it will be used for the good of the entire magical community. Of course now, the pressure is on you two to come up with some really good potions and medicines," he said with a smile. "So, sign the paper and get to work," he added.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Potter, sir," Neville said with a wide grin.

Both he and Professor Sprout signed the parchment. Harry took it and once he was sure the ink was dry he rolled it up and put it in his robe pocket.

"I'll drop this off with Gringotts and they'll set things up by the end of the week and they said they'd send a copy back to you right after. I guess that takes care of that. I'm going up to the castle to see the Head," Harry said as he stood up and shook hands with his friend and the Professor.

As he walked out of the office he could hear the beginning of an animated discussion behind him and he smiled. Harry walked across the grounds and up the steps to the big double doors. He opened one door and walked into the foyer. He had been told by the Head that he needn't bother knocking anymore for admittance. As long as it was within hours he was free to come and go as he chose. He made his way up to the Head's office and as he approached the statue swung out of the way and allowed him access to the spiral stairway. Harry

was sure that as long as someone was in the Head's office anyone who approached the entrance was observed somehow.

"Harry, how nice to see you. What brings you here today?" Professor McGonagall asked as she opened the office door for him.

"I was up to see Neville and Professor Sprout. I thought if you had a moment I'd like to discuss the scholarship program with you," Harry said.

"Of course, Harry, please come in and sit down," the Headmistress said as she gestured to her visitors chair while she resumed her seat behind her desk.

"Professor Sprout told me all about what you've done, Harry. It should prove to be a tremendous boon to the community and a very fitting tribute to you parents. Your mother was very adept at potion making."

"Yes, ma'am. There's also a large dose of self interest in this as well. Seems to me someone who has spent as much time in a sick bed as I have should do whatever he can to support medical research," Harry said with a straight face.

There were a number of chuckles from the portraits on the wall.

"Yes, I can see the sense in that, Harry. So, what was it you wished to discuss about the scholarship idea?"

"When I first suggested the idea a few years ago to the bankers at Gringotts it was sort of a small thing based on funds derived from a few investments I had made. I'd like to see about expanding it. I'm sure there are more than a few students that could use some help, either partial or in full. I'd guess that there are some young witches or wizards who never get here because they can't afford to," Harry said.

"Yes, that is true, Harry. We send out more first year letters than students who accept to attend, either because their families can't afford it or they choose to go elsewhere or if they are muggle born, think it's some sort of mistake or prank," the Head responded.

"I'd like to try and help improve those numbers. I'd like to establish a better system for identifying and assisting those who would like to attend but can't afford it. Can you help me with that?" Harry asked earnestly.

"Of course we will, Harry. I'll contact the Board of Governors. We'll work out what the number of students might be and the cost. I'll send you a message when we have the numbers," the Headmaster said.

"Harry, my boy," a familiar voice called.

"Yes, sir," Harry responded, turning in his chair to face the portrait of Professor Dumbledore.

"Is anything amiss?"

"Amiss, sir? No, I don't think so. Why do you ask?" Harry replied.

"Perhaps it's just an old man's misperception but one might conclude that you are in the process of getting your affairs in order, establishing your legacy, so to speak," the Professor said.

"Um, no, sir. That wasn't what I was thinking," Harry said but the comment stirred a thought about dragons and predictions.

"My apologies then for asking," Dumbledore said.

"No need to apologize, sir. I appreciate your concern," Harry said.

Shortly after, Harry left the Head's office and started to walk towards the gates of the school. He was thinking about what Professor Dumbledore had said. Was he concerned about the future and that was what was driving him to set these programs up? Was the speculation that the Mysteries department was attempting to create another hybridized dragon along with the warning from Hagrid about what the Centaurs were talking about prompting Harry to, as the former Head suggested, get his affairs in order? Or was he simply continuing the work that he had started with the shops in Diagon Alley.

He Disapparated back to lobby of the Ministry and made his way to his office. He needed to finish the presentation he was due to make in Paris in just over a week. He was making his way through another in a seemingly endless number of editing reads when he was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was Milligan.

“Here’s the final report on everything we have to date on the smugglers, chief. If you give it the ok we’ll make some copies that you can take with you to Paris.”

“Thanks, Milligan. I’ll give it a read through later today. I’m glad you stopped by. Shut the door and take a seat,” Harry said.

The lanky wizard closed the door behind him and sat down across from Harry. He knew Harry had something on his mind and was willing to wait for his boss to make the first move.

“Did you come up with anything more on what the spooks are doing with those dragon remains?” Harry asked.

“Nothing other than that they’ve made some contacts with a few researchers into those muggle sciences I’ve mentioned before. I’d have to say it looks like they are serious about the whole thing.”

“I was afraid you’d say that but I’m not really surprised. Keep digging but don’t tip your hand. If you have to, back off for a time. I also want to know if you can find out if they’ve made any changes to how you get in and out of there. I’d have to think after that time I went in there as a fifth year they’d have made some changes.”

“Are you looking for a way to sneak in or making a raid in force, chief?” Milligan asked.

“At this point I’d have to say both. I don’t know what’s going on or what their motive is so we need to stay flexible and cover as much as we can,” Harry said seriously.

“Ok, chief. If you don’t mind my saying it, your young psychic could be a lot of help here. I could just walk her around and as we come

across a spook she could read them and pick up all kinds of information.”

“I’ll give it some thought. Thanks, Milligan,” Harry said.

“No problem, sir,” the Auror said as he stood up.

Harry sat back and looked up at the ceiling then he closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. Was all this somehow mingled or was it just one more in a never ending series of problems he was being required to deal with? He then went back to the task of giving his presentation a final edit and then picked up the report to read. When he had completed it and initialed to indicate his approval he looked at the cover and thought about what had started with such a simple conversation between himself and George that day at the Burrow. He dropped the report off with Tom with instructions to return it to Milligan and then he left for home.

As always, Kreacher bowed him in and told him dinner would be served in a short time, once Mistress Ginny had returned from Holyhead. Harry nodded and decided to go upstairs and see how Abigail was coming along with her project. Her door was partially open but Harry knocked and waited until she called for him to come in.

“Hello, little one, how are you getting on with your painting?” Harry asked.

Abigail turned around in her chair at the small drafting table that Harry had bought for her.

“Hi, Harry,” she said, “I’m doing great. I’m working on the details of the faces for each of the figures. Have a look,” she added.

Harry came to stand behind her and looked down at the sheet of sketch paper on the table in front of her. It was the face of the witch and Harry thought that it looked very familiar and said so.

“Yes, sir. I’m using your mum, your real mum as the model. I’ve seen her enough times to know what she looked like. It’s not going to be an exact likeness but pretty close. Your dad is the model for the wizard,

Kreacher for the house elf and Bane and Ronan for the Centaur. The Goblin is a bit tougher. I've only ever seen them in a book and I'm not sure how accurate those representations were."

"I can take you over to Gringotts in the morning. I'd imagine they'd let you sit in the lobby and sketch some likenesses of the Goblins working there," Harry offered.

"That would be terrific, Harry. Thank you," Abigail replied breathlessly.

"Dinner is almost ready. You might want to think about taking a break and getting cleaned up," Harry said.

"Alright, Harry. I'm starved," she said with a grin.

"I'm pretty hungry myself," Harry said with a smile and then he turned and went down to his study to wait for the call to dinner.

He was deep in thought when he was startled by a familiar voice.

"Hello, handsome. What are you thinking about?" Ginny said as she stepped into his office.

"Hmm, oh, I guess I'm just worrying about what I'm hearing about this dragon business with the spooks at the Ministry. I have a very uneasy feeling about it."

"Well, sweetheart. I'd trust your feelings more than most people's facts. If you think something is going to happen I'd suggest you plan accordingly because it's most likely going to happen," she said seriously.

Harry simply nodded and then stood up and came over to give his wife a welcoming hug which she accepted and returned with enthusiasm.

"Mmmmm, that feels good, Harry. For a lad who doesn't know why someone would want to hug him, you sure do it well," she said.

"I've had a lot of practice thanks to the Weasley family women," Harry said with a smirk.

"Oh, Kreacher said dinner was ready. We better get a move on," Ginny said.

"Ok, good, I'm starving," Harry said as they turned and walked out of study.

Harry called up to Abigail who apparently was already on her way as she came hurtling down the staircase just as he said her name.

"Whoa there, little one. You'll fall and break your neck if you keep flying down those stairs like that," Harry said seriously.

"Ok, Harry, it's just that I'm really hungry," she said.

"What? Were you afraid I'd eat it all before you got here?" Harry said with his half smile.

"Well, it could happen, Harry. I've seen the way you've been eating lately," she said with a little laugh.

Harry looked at Ginny who was looking back trying not to laugh. Harry just shook his head and then they made their way to the kitchen to eat. As they sat around the table Harry looked at Abigail and said,

"Ginny and I have talked about going to Godric's Hollow this Saturday, little one. I'd like you to come with us," Harry said.

"Sure, Harry. I'd like to see what it really looks like. I only saw it that time in your dream and I couldn't tell if that was how it really looked."

Their dinner passed quietly and after they were done Abigail returned to her work in her room and Harry and Ginny retired to the study. The young couple had settled into a new pattern for the evenings. Harry would sit in his new comfortable chair that was imported from the continent from the company that provided them to Beauxbaton and Ginny would sit at the desk working on her notes on

Harry's life. Occasionally she would ask him a question or make a comment but it was usually a quiet time for them.

The following morning Harry and Abigail left together for Diagon Alley and Gringotts. They were admitted by the door Goblins and as they stood a moment in the lobby, the elderly manager, Kandak hurried over to meet them.

"Mr. Potter, a pleasure to see you this morning. How may the bank assist you today?"

"A couple of things, Kandak. Firstly, my ward, Miss Westwood here has been commissioned by the Ministry to create a new mural in the lobby to replace the old fountain. It's to represent the magical races in a more realistic way. Unfortunately, she hasn't had the opportunity to meet any Goblins and we hoped she would be able to sit in the visitors lounge and make some sketches of those of your employees in the area."

"The young lady is an artist?" the Goblin asked.

"A very talented one," Harry replied.

"She is certainly welcome to do so, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you, Kandak. We appreciate it. I'd also like to take a little of your time to talk about the scholarship fund. Do you have a few moments?"

"Certainly, sir."

Kandak gestured to one of the other Goblins in the area and spoke to him. The clerk gestured for Abigail to walk with him to the lounge and Harry went with Kandak to his office. It was perhaps half an hour later when Harry returned and he could see Abigail sitting on the edge of a chair, her sketched pad balanced on her lap, her pencil flying over the paper in firm strokes, her head bobbing up and down as she shifted her gaze from the paper to the Goblins moving about the main chamber of the bank and back. Harry stood and watched for a while, seeing how various Goblins would seemingly wander past, trying to

see what she was drawing. More than a few human customers likewise detoured to try and catch a glimpse. He finally made his way over and sat down next to his ward and looked at the various faces she had sketched.

"The young lady is an artist indeed," a gravelly voice said from behind them.

Harry looked over his shoulder and saw that Kandak had quietly come to stand behind them.

"She has captured the likenesses very well. Perhaps once her commission to the Ministry is completed we might discuss the possibility of doing something for the Bank."

He nodded to Harry and then walked off to confer with several subordinates. Harry looked back down at Abigail, whose concentration had not been broken by the comment. Another ten minutes or so passed until she looked up and laid her pencil down.

"I think that should be enough for me to come up with a real good representation for the mural, Harry. Thanks for bringing me here."

"You're welcome, little one. By the way, did you hear what Kandak said while you were working?"

"Um, no, Harry. Sometimes when I'm really concentrating I don't hear much around me."

"He suggested that if the work you do for the Ministry comes off well, the bank might be interested in having you do something for them," Harry said with a smile.

"Wow, that would be great, Harry."

"Would you be interested in coming to the office with me for a while, Abigail?" Harry asked.

“Wow, sure, Harry,” she said and then her eyes went soft. “Hmm, yes. I think it would be a very good idea if I got a tour of the building from Mr. Milligan.”

Harry laughed and then said,

“I’m glad I don’t try and hide anything from you, little one.”

Abigail just gave Harry a ‘look’ and then laughed a bit. She left the bank and walked up the Alley. As they passed the Ice Cream Haven they looked in and saw Angelina working behind the bakery counter.

“Dash in and let Angelina know we’ll stop in for dessert after lunch, ok?” Harry said.

“Yes, sir,” Abigail replied with a big grin.

Harry watched as the diminutive witch hurried into the shop. He saw Angelina move quickly out from behind the counter to meet her half way. They shared a tight hug, Angelina dropping down to one knee. He could see them talk for a bit and then Angelina looked up at Harry on the other side of the window and waved and nodded. With a last squeeze Abigail hurried back outside to rejoin her guardian.

“Angelina said she’d have a special surprise waiting for us, Harry.”

The two walked through the Cauldron, informing Hannah they would be returning for lunch later and then they walked to the Ministry and took the phone box elevator to the lobby. As they walked to Harry’s office, Abigail returned the waves or greetings from several witches and wizards they passed. Harry looked down and said,

“You know, if I tried to keep you from working here, little one, I’d wind up in a lot of trouble.”

“Well, Harry, if you don’t want to hire me, I’m sure I could find someone who would,” she replied airily, tossing her long black hair back over her shoulder in a very Fleur like gesture.

"I think you've been spending entirely too much time around a certain French girl," he said ruefully.

Abigail just giggled. The walked to Tom Medford's tiny office and Harry stuck his head in.

"Tom, can you go and see if you can find Milligan for me?"

"Yes, sir," Tom said as he stood up quickly.

As he came out of the door he saw Abigail standing there and said,

"Oh, good morning, Ms. Westwood, nice to see you again."

Abigail looked at him with those dark, penetrating eyes and said,

"Tom, I think we know each other well enough that you can call me Abigail."

"Oh, certainly, um, Abigail," he said and then hurried off on his errand.

She watched him head down the hall and then she looked at Harry.

"He works very hard for you, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does, sometimes too hard I think. I get the feeling that because he never did any field work he thinks he needs to prove himself some other way," Harry said.

"He's committed to your cause, Harry. Just like the Patrollers, especially the former DA members."

Harry looked down at his ward and said,

"My cause? I didn't realize I had a cause."

"Not that you may have ever spoken about but it's there none the less and we all see it," she said with an uncharacteristic firmness.

Any comment that Harry was going to make in reply was cutoff when Milligan sauntered up the corridor with a small smile.

“Well, hello there again, Miss Abigail. You know you ought to talk to the chief here about putting you on the payroll if this keeps up.”

“We’ve been talking about that, Mr. Milligan. I don’t think he’s quite ready to make that step yet, but it’ll happen I’m sure,” she said with a grin.

Harry gave them both a ‘look’ and then gestured for them both to enter his office. He sat behind his desk while Abigail and Milligan took chairs after the investigator shut the door. Harry looked at them both and then at the young witch.

“Abigail, as you’re probably aware this isn’t entirely a social visit. I need to ask for your help,” Harry said seriously.

“Of course, Harry, I’m always ready to help you,” she said, quietly but just as seriously.

“Little one, I don’t know how much you ‘saw’ before but we have reason to believe that the people down in the Mysteries department are trying to recreate the work that resulted in that hybrid dragon that I tangled with a while back. Milligan has been picking up on some bits and pieces but it’s not much to go on. He suggested he take you on a walking tour of the Ministry building and if you run into anyone from Mysteries you’re to try and read them and see if you can come up with any more information. Can you do that?” Harry asked.

“Sure, Harry, no problem,” she replied enthusiastically.

Harry shifted his attention to Milligan.

“Remember, this is a just a walk around. No trying to get into secure areas or anything like that and if she looks like she’s getting tired bring her right back here, understood?” Harry said, his green eyes fixed firmly on his chief investigator.

“No worries, chief. I’d have some pretty nasty folks after me if I let anything happen to our girl here.”

“Alright, off you go, and be careful, the two of you,” Harry said.

He watched as the lanky wizard stood and opened the door for Abigail with a little bow and the two left his office. Harry marveled at the ‘magic’ that allowed the young witch to wrap the hard bitten Aurors around her little finger. He had to admit he was probably just as spellbound as the others. He got on with the business of slogging through the morning’s paperwork.

His work was eventually interrupted by a gnawing feeling in his belly and he looked up and the clock on the wall indicated that lunch was approaching. He wondered if Abigail would get back in time. He only had to wait another five minutes to stop his worrying. Abigail and Milligan trooped into his office with very noncommittal looks on their faces. The investigator closed the door and sat down. Harry looked at them. They looked back at Harry. Then Abigail broke out in a huge grin while Milligan chose a more muted but satisfied expression.

“Ok, out with it, what did you come up with?” Harry asked.

“Well it’s not the entire answer but it’s a start. We ran across three of the spooks coming and going in the building. One of them apparently has been spending a fair amount of time conferring with a muggle college that has an extensive genetic engineering department. Our girl here got a good look at him and then did a pretty thorough read of his recent activities. Some of it didn’t make sense but I think that’s because we don’t understand all the details of this stuff. I’ve got it written down and I’ll do some research. The second spook apparently isn’t fully involved but it seems like he’s carrying around a huge chip on his shoulder because he’s not in on the ‘big project’. It’s your friend, Ellington. If I play him right I might be able to turn him and he could provide some very valuable information,” Milligan said with a smug smile.

“It’s an idea, but be careful. I’d rather not know a few things then tip our hand that we’re investigating another department,” Harry said.

“Yes, sir. Now the last character was really interesting. I’m not sure why but this one was sitting in one of the little canteens, the spooks aren’t well know for spending a lot of time outside their dungeon down there but anyway, we just causally had a seat and made like we were taking a break and Miss Abigail peeled this one pretty well. It appears that they set up a facility somewhere pretty isolated and that’s where the ‘big project’ is being conducted. I haven’t worked out the exact location but it appears that it’s on an island, could be the Hebrides, possibly the Orkneys. We need to look into that some more but I don’t think it will be all that hard to figure out. But there’s more to it, chief. Go ahead and tell him, Miss.”

“Harry, all three of these wizards are very agitated. I’m not sure if it’s fear or anxiety or what, but they aren’t happy about something. Ellington might be because he’s on the outside but the other two don’t seem to like what’s going on for some reason,” Abigail said.

“Well, that could mean a few things. One, that things aren’t going well. Or things are progressing and they aren’t happy with the direction it’s going. Well, great job the two of you. Milligan, let’s give this some thought and see how we should proceed. I think I’m going to have to approach the Minister and sound him out on this. As for you, young lady, I believe I owe you lunch,” Harry said with a smile.

“Oh, yes, sir. I’m starving. I’m a little tired too, but not too bad. I think with how upset those men are it was pretty easy to read what was going on.”

“Alright, Milligan, I’ll see you later. Abigail, let’s head for the Cauldron.”

Before Milligan could open the door Harry added one last comment.

“For the time being, none of this gets discussed outside this office, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes, Harry.”

Harry just nodded and they left his office, Milligan to go his way and Harry and Abagail to head for the phone box elevator. They ate at the Cauldron and then went to the Ice Cream Haven for that promised dessert. Angelina served them a slice of devil's food cake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream topped with fudge sauce, a dab of whipped cream and a cherry.

Harry was in heaven and Abagail wasn't far behind. As they were eating Angelina came over and sat down.

"So, what do you think?"

"I think I finally feel full for the first time in weeks," Harry said with a smile.

"I think I'm going to explode but it would be worth it," Abagail added.

"I think I'll take those as positives. Say, Harry, what plans do you have for Abagail this afternoon?" Angelina asked.

"Nothing specific. I was going to leave it up to her if she wanted to go home or stay at the office with me. Why?"

"I'd like to get her opinion on some ideas I had for some more artwork here. I thought she could stay here and then I'd drop her off at your house when we close."

"Your call, little one, what would you prefer?" Harry asked.

"I'll stay here if you don't mind, Harry. I can talk to Angelina and I can also get some more work done on the Goblin representation."

"OK, I'll see you when you get home then. I think I'll take a turn around the Alley first and walk off some of this food," Harry said as he stood up.

He got hugs from both Angelina and Abagail, one going high and the other low. With a smile he left the shop and then after a leisurely walk around the alley he headed back to work. The afternoon was uneventful and he was home in time for dinner. In fact the rest of the

week was uneventful as the Minister was unavailable until the beginning of the next week and Milligan was doing some research to make sense of some of the details that Abigail picked up.

So it was on Saturday morning that Harry, Ginny and Abigail climbed aboard the Knight Bus for their trip to Godric's Hollow. Harry probably could have requested a Ministry car but he just didn't feel right about it. After a maniacal journey that had Abigail laughing and squealing they arrived on the outskirts of the town. Hand in hand they walked the short distance to the 'war memorial' that to them revealed it's true self as the statue of the three Potters. Harry was in the middle with Ginny on his right and Abigail on his left. He could feel both of them press in close to his sides and tighten their grips on his hand. After a few moments they walked away and toward the end of the street where the house he had spent the first fifteen months of his life stood in ruins. Again the spell that hid the house and grounds from muggle eyes gave way to the wizard and two witches and they could see the stone structure and overgrown garden.

They could see the whole upper corner where Harry's room once stood blown away from the force of the backlash of magic. They walked up to the front door and Harry pushed it opened. He stepped inside with Ginny and Abigail behind him. Looking around there was no great revelation, no flood of memory. He had been too young for anything to really register. The house felt empty, cold, even in the warm summer sun. He turned and looked at Abigail and she looked back with a sad smile.

"Nothing, Harry. It's just an empty stone shell. I'm sorry. Maybe when the magic backfired it stripped everything away," she said barely above a whisper.

Harry just nodded and with a final look around he gestured for them to precede him out the door, which he pulled closed. He walked down the walkway and didn't spare a glance backward. Their next stop was the churchyard cemetery where he knew the graves of his mother and father and other ancestors were located. Harry moved toward the two graves of his parents while Ginny and Abigail remained some steps behind. He knelt down and ran his hands over the front of the stone markers, his fingers running along the engraved names. His

eyes began to mist over and he settled back on his haunches for a moment when he felt a warm but gossamer light touch on the back of his head. He felt more than heard the words,

“Don’t grieve for us, son. We played our part in the final victory and are content. Know that we love you and watch over you.”

And as quickly as it had come it was gone. He blinked away the tears and then stood up and turned to see Abigail and Ginny walked towards him. Abigail had that sad, knowing smile and Ginny was looking at him quizzically. He stepped forward to meet them and wrapped them both in his arms as they did him. For a moment they felt a warmth embrace all three of them. It lingered a bit and then was gone. When they stepped apart Harry looked down at his two special ‘girls’ and Abigail smiled and said,

“Do you understand now, Harry? You never really were alone.”

Harry's Future, Part 27

The Aurors' break room had once again been commandeered to serve as a conference room. On this occasion Harry was having a staff meeting. Seated around the one old battered table were himself, Maxwell, Milligan, Tom Medford and Reggie Phillips. The task of taking notes had fallen to the two administrative assistants.

"I wanted to get us all together so I could bring you up to date on what went on at the conference in Paris last week and then we'll all get up to date on what's been going on here at home. On a personal note I'm happy to say that I managed not to fall off the stage or knock over the podium," Harry said with a crooked smile. "There seemed to be some interest in how we've been organizing things here and a good deal more on what was going on as part of the investigation. The other presenters all included some mention of that problem in their briefs along with their own local issues. I brought back a copy of the presentations so anyone who's interested can get a look at it. It appears that we all have some common problems but there are also some highly unique ones. I, for one, am glad we don't have giants occasionally dropping in from their mountain homes."

"I'm glad our smuggling friends hadn't managed to acquire the services of any of them. Most of the giants seem to be in that same general area," Maxwell commented.

"At least as far as we know," Milligan added quietly.

Harry nodded then continued,

"There were a number of side discussions after the presentations were finished but not much in the way of specific information was exchanged. The general idea seemed to be that that was best left to the professional investigators and the bosses were better off keeping their noses out of it," he finished with a chuckle.

"Why do I have a feeling that you were one of the ones pushing that idea," Milligan said.

Harry just gave him a 'who? me?' look and then shook his head.

“The one other thing that was agreed was trying to set up an efficient way to exchange information across the different national departments. The concept is for each department to spend some time over the next three months coming up with ideas and then a separate working level conference will convene to try and hammer a system out. So give it some thought and we’ll sit down in a couple of weeks and see what we can start sorting out. That’s about it really. Like I said there wasn’t a great deal of specifics but at least it’s a start. So what’s been going on around here of late?”

Maxwell went first,

“There hasn’t been much of a change in the level of problems in either of the Alley’s or Hogsmeade. Most of it is the usual public disturbances in Hogsmeade Friday and Saturday nights. We have noticed an uptick in activity involving reports of dark magic. It’s similar to what happened after Voldemort had his first run in with you. Once his influence was gone the lesser witches or wizards involved in the dark arts started to surface. When Riddle was strong he either attracted them to work for him or suppressed those he saw as competitors. With him gone I guess they see their way clear to start causing their own trouble. We’re investigating the reports and we’ll gather them in as appropriate.”

“Ok, but remember what we’ve discussed. Make sure the information is good and that we understand the situation. I don’t want us getting blindsided like the last time. The one thing I did come back with from Paris was the knowledge that we still don’t know how far that old wizard in Romania had reached,” Harry said.

“You know, chief,” Milligan began. “I’ve been given this all some thought. Now, I’m not going to argue with you about how strong this old fellow was. You were there, I wasn’t. But I’m not so sure that this character was in the same league as Voldemort. If you look at what went on objectively it was pretty clumsy. Their actions in Knockturn Alley were fairly obvious and lacked any subtlety. What Voldemort did with stealth and subterfuge these guys tried with brute force. The old man even managed to attract your attention when he had several

very good examples as to why that wasn't such a good idea. I don't think we have the same level of threat here."

"You might be right," Harry replied, "but let's not be complacent. Let's make sure we don't overlook what's going on in Knockturn Alley and as these reports of dark magic come up let's take them seriously." He turned to Tom and said, "Make sure that as part of your compiling the reports on various incidents that anything related to dark magic is flagged."

"Yes, sir," Tom replied.

"Anything else?" Harry asked them.

"I think that's about it, sir," Maxwell said as Milligan shook his head.

"Alright, the only other thing I have is I'll be back and forth a bit over the next few weeks as the Quidditch camp gets going. In fact I'll be taking a weeks vacation for the second week. Bill and Charlie Weasley are doing most of the work but I'll be making a number of trips up there. We also have the dedication of the new mural that Abigail has put together. I understand that will be just before she heads back to school. I'll pass along the particulars when I know them, I'm sure there are a number of the Aurors that would like to be there."

The others nodded and smiled to one degree or other.

"Ok, thanks everyone, let's get back to work," Harry said.

The meeting broke up and they all went back to whatever business awaited them. When Harry got to his office he found a message on his desk. It was from Gringotts. After returning from Godric's Hollow Harry had contacted them about anything they knew about available land in and around Ottery St. Catchpole in particular or Devon in general. He opened the sealed parchment and read. It appeared that there were several properties that might interest him and Gringotts would be happy to contact the owners on his behalf. Harry nodded to himself and would give the information to Ginny, who had taken

charge of the search. Her time with the Harpies had ended the prior week and she was anxious to get on with this new phase of their lives.

There was more to the message and Harry continued to read. Had anyone been watching they would have seen his forehead wrinkle as he got to the end of the note. He went back and reread the perplexing section. Gringotts was inquiring if Harry was aware that he was already the owner of a tract of land that had come to him through Sirius. It was located in the north and Gringotts was working to determine exactly where and what the particulars were.

Harry sat back. He had no intentions of building a home that far away from his family but it intrigued him to know that there was more to the Black legacy than the fortune stowed away in the Gringotts vaults. He wondered what else might be out there. Knowing the Black family reputation he shuddered a bit at the thought.

His thoughts returned to Ginny and the prospect of building a new home and starting to raise a family. He smiled a bit at the thought that he was already the head of a household when he considered Abigail but there were whole facets of raising children that had been bypassed when he took responsibility for her. Things like a pregnant wife, birth, first teeth, first steps and all the rest that he was looking forward to. He only hoped that Ginny would be less, well, just less to deal with than Fleur had been for poor Bill. Harry loved his 'big sister' about as much as anyone could but some of the stories that Bill had shared with him in confidence were enough to raise the hair on the back of his neck. This thought also reminded him that he was due for a visit to Shell cottage and very soon.

When Harry arrived home that evening he found Ginny and Abigail sitting side by side at the kitchen table pouring over a number of sketches scattered across the table. He leaned down to receive hugs and kisses from both and then he began to look at the drawings. Most were of various views of houses as well as a couple of floor plans and landscape layouts.

"I see you two have had a busy day," he said.

"It started right after breakfast, sweetheart," Ginny replied with a smile. "Abigail and I were talking about the new house and we were tossing around some ideas and when I mentioned I was having trouble visualizing one of hers, she dashed off and came back with a sketch pad and some pencils and we've been at it all day. What do you think?"

"First of all, the sketches are terrific. I'll have to look them over carefully to see what you ladies are coming up with but I think it will make the whole process a lot easier. Oh, by the way, here's what Gringotts found in the way of land," Harry said as he handed over the message about the properties.

Ginny read it through and then looked up at her husband and said,

"You never mentioned anything about land up north."

"That's because I didn't know anything about any land up north. Sirius and I never really talked about what the Black family holdings were. Never got the chance I guess. What information I got originally from Gringotts had to do with money and where it came from. I knew the Blacks had some properties that generated income but not any specifics like where and how big. I suppose I'm going to have to have it all looked into," he concluded.

"Wow, Harry," Abigail began, "just think, you might own some spooky old castle with dungeons and ghosts and stuff."

"Hey, yeah," Harry replied, feeling like teasing his ward a bit, "that would be great. I could start my own school of witchcraft and wizardry there."

Abigail's eyes widened then narrowed and she stuck her tongue out at him as he laughed. Their discussion was cut short by a meaningful cough from Kreacher indicating that he wished to serve dinner. The three quickly gathered the sketches up and set them aside and then sat down to another expertly cooked dinner. As they ate Harry gave Abigail a look and said,

“Since you spent the whole day sketching do I assume correctly that you finished your paintings for the Ministry?”

“Yup, last night,” she replied.

“Do we get to see them or do we have to wait for the grand revealing at the Ministry?”

“Of course you get to see them, Harry. Right after dinner if you want to.”

“I most certainly do,” he replied.

And they did. As soon as dinner was finished Abigail led Harry and Ginny up to the third floor and the spare bedroom where she had placed each canvas as it was finished. They were lined up side by side against the long wall of the room. Harry assumed that either Abigail or Kreacher had levitated them into the room for the canvasses looked cumbersome. The paintings on the canvasses were anything but. Each figure seemed so lifelike as to be ready to step out of the painting. Harry was half expecting to be able to converse or interact with the figures but then realized since they were not portraits of actual beings but representations of each race they didn't possess the personality of real persons to animate them.

He was particularly drawn to the witch and wizard. While not actually portraits of his parents, they suggested them so strongly that Harry felt a lump form in his throat. He finally made the effort to examine the other three figures and he was amazed at how accurately they reflected the beings he had become so familiar with. There would be no mistaking that these were creatures of strong personality and a purpose of their own. Even the house elf looked more like a resolute and capable worker as opposed to an obsequious slave as had been reflected in the original fountain sculpture.

“Amazing, Abigail. Absolutely amazing,” Harry said.

“Thank you, Harry. I think it's the best I've ever done,” she replied, barely above a whisper.

“Yet, Abigail, yet. I think you have a future of many amazing paintings ahead of you,” Ginny said, practically in awe.

“I’ll let the Minister know tomorrow and he can make arrangements to have them picked up,” Harry said as he put his arm around the little artist.

“Ok, Harry, thank you.”

As expected the Minister was very pleased with the information that the mural was completed and he immediately dispatched a van and several members of the Ministry building engineering department to transfer the canvasses. He went to great lengths to explain the importance of the mural and the dire consequences of any damage incurred during the move. Shacklebolt surprised Harry with the announcement that there would be no unveiling ceremony. The Minister thought the painting would have more impact if it was just there at the start of the new work week.

This wasn’t such a bad thing since that day would also be the first full day of the Quidditch camp at Hogwarts. The participating students were scheduled to arrive via a special run of the Express on Sunday and they would have their first session on Monday morning. The elder Weasley brothers had been working furiously to finalize schedules and confirm who would be available to conduct sessions during the two weeks. The one thing they didn’t have to worry about was a lack of talent on either side. Nearly eighty students had signed up which was a very respectable number out of a student body of approximately three hundred. As for instructors and demonstrators both Bill and Charlie were to be full time. A full dozen retired professionals had likewise pledged to be there for at least one full week with several promising a full two weeks. Nearly twenty current pro players were expected to make appearances of at least a full day to conduct special sessions or just pitch in and help. The entire Holyhead Harpies team was scheduled for a one day visit during the second week to serve as a ‘red’ team to play against make-up or ‘blue’ teams of students.

Harry would be popping in and out during the first week as his schedule permitted and Ginny was intending to spend as much time

as possible there as well. George and Angelina were also going to be putting in a full day each week. While Ron's patroller schedule would limit his time there he was perhaps the most nervous of any of the adults supporting the camp. At Harry's insistence and with the support of all the family he was going to make the welcome and introductory comments on the morning of the first day.

So it was on a sunny, warm August morning Ron stood with his back to the railing looking up at eighty young witches and wizards dressed in a variety of Quidditch team colors. He glanced to the side where he saw his best friend smiling encouragement. Ron gave a little cough and then let his gaze sweep over the students.

"How does Harry do this?" he thought to himself and then after another cough began to speak.

"Good morning, my name is Ron Weasley. I can guess that I'm not one of the Weasleys that you were expecting to see this morning but don't worry. The famous ones are waiting in the wings to teach you all kinds of amazing things, but my best mate thought it would be a better idea if you heard from me first. You see, I'm more like most of you than my brothers or sister are. Most of you won't be professional Quidditch players. A lot of you won't even have the chance to play for a house team. Like me you'll just be playing the game for the love of it. To fly and have a good time with your mates," Ron said as he looked at the different faces that were looking back at him, noticing the few nods or half smiles.

"But maybe, just maybe, a chance will come along when you don't expect it and the things that you learn here during the next two weeks will have you ready to step in and step up and maybe, just maybe, your name could wind up on a Quidditch cup plaque like mine did. There are going to be a lot of pretty special people here over the next two weeks and you may think that you could never play at their level. The good news is you don't have to. The only thing you have to do is try hard and be better at the end of the two weeks than you were at the beginning," he concluded with a half smile and red cheeks as the students applauded loudly for him.

Harry stepped forward and came to stand next to Ron and said,

“There’s another lesson you can learn from Ron. His stepping in and stepping up wasn’t an easy thing to do. He took a lot of grief and ribbing from some of the other students while he tried to get his game together. But he never gave up and when the time came he dug down deep and came up with a brilliant performance as keeper for Gryffindor and played a big part in winning the Cup that year. I may be a little biased but I think what he did was one of the most courageous things I’ve ever seen,” Harry finished with a smile as he threw his arm around Ron’s shoulder, which was a bit of a reach, and shook his best friend’s hand.

Ron blushed more this time but with a big smile he gave Harry a one armed hug and then with a wave he moved off to the sound of more applause. Harry let it go on a bit and then held up his hands. When the students had quieted down he looked up at them and said,

“Ron said a lot of good things just now but I want to emphasize what he said about flying and having fun. There just may be a future professional or national team player out there, maybe not. It doesn’t matter. What’s important is that you have fun when you play the game and we’re here to help you play it better and have more fun doing it. If we discover a rare talent, so much the better but if that doesn’t happen to be you don’t worry about it. You’ll get just as much attention from the instructors and coaches and hopefully you’ll have as much fun as we will. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to be here for the whole two weeks. However I have managed to squeeze a full week’s vacation out of my boss so I’ll be here all next week. But it shouldn’t matter because we have a long list of former and current pros as well as former Hogwarts stand outs that will be here to provide plenty of instruction. We will also have some representatives from various equipment manufacturers who will be conducting some seminars on how to care for and get the most out of your brooms and other equipment. And we also have a few surprises in store as we go along so I’m sure you’ll all have a great time,” Harry said with a smile.

“So, now that the introduction is over I’m going to hand you over to two of the finest players ever to graduate from Hogwarts, Bill and Charlie Weasley, who were instrumental in setting up this camp and who will be here for the full two weeks to make sure everything runs

smoothly,” Harry said as he turned and motioned for his two ‘brothers’ to come forward. “Bill, Charlie, they’re all yours.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Bill began as he faced the students. “Yes, believe it or not I used to fly for Gryffindor house and if you dust off some of the older Quidditch cup plaques you’ll find Charlie and mine names on a few of them.”

This got a laugh from the students as Bill and Charlie were well known for their prowess on the pitch and particularly among the Gryffindors their exploits were often discussed when Quidditch was the topic. The camp began with the mundane matters of calling the roll to make sure everyone was accounted for and then the introduction of additional ‘staff’ members. More than a few of the names brought applause as a well known flyer was recognized. The first day was given over to basics with each ‘camper’ put through various flying drills to establish levels of proficiency. Harry sat in the stands for the morning and watched as the students were put through their paces. He was pleased to see that his idea had come to fruition and he was even more pleased that it had happened largely through the efforts of others. It bolstered his earlier realization that he didn’t have to be the one to do everything.

As promised it was a very busy two weeks. Once the ‘campers’ had been evaluated and split into groups by skill level the real work began. Because the intent was to improve the skill level of all the flyers particular attention was paid to the basics. It was interesting to note how even the most accomplished of the students found ways to improve something as simple as how you sat and handled your broom. These basic reviews progressed into more detailed work on the individual positions. This was where the visiting professionals, past and present, really shined. The small groups and the individual attention that the students received, once they got past the awe factor, helped improve skill levels dramatically.

It wasn’t all hard work though. By the end of the first week, short practice matches were held and students and instructors alike enjoyed themselves immensely as they battled in the sky above the Hogwarts pitch. And as Harry had promised the first big surprise came at dinner time on the Thursday of the first week. As had been

the practice since the beginning of the camp, the tables in the Great Hall had been rearranged so that the campers weren't divided by houses and they were closer to the dais where the 'staff' sat. On this particular night things were a little different. The tables were rearranged by position with the appropriate ball as a centerpiece to indicate which was which. There were also designated seats left open.

As Charlie Weasley walked up to the podium he could see the students in animated conversation, looking at and gesturing towards the empty seats and the centerpieces. He inwardly smiled as he was well aware of what was to come. He rapped on the podium with his knuckles and began to speak.

"Alright, everyone. Can I have your attention please? I can see you've all noticed the changes in the seating arrangements. That's because we have something rather special for you this evening. Several weeks ago, while we were working on the last details for the camp, I received a message from a group of individuals who had heard about what we were doing and wanted to be a part of it. However, they didn't have much time and we had to really think about how we could include them in the program. Tonight's special dinner is what we came up with. So, without further delay allow me to introduce our special guests for the evening. I give you the Quidditch World Cup champions from Ireland, Troy, Mullet, Moran, Ryan, Quigley, Connolly ...and LYNCH."

As Charlie introduced each of the champion flyers they strode into the Great Hall smiling and waving. It took until Moran's entrance before the stunned students could recover enough to begin a raucous greeting of cheers and clapping. All the students were standing and a few, apparently from Ireland themselves, were standing on their benches. As each of the famous flyers reached their prearranged seats they began to shake hands with their table mates. It was clear that this would be an evening that none of the students would ever forget. Charlie allowed the noise and introductions to continue for a few moments and then using the gavel rapped for everyone's attention. When he had it he said,

"Ok, everyone enjoy your dinner. Afterwards, our guests have been gracious enough to agree to stay for a question and answer period."

To say the least the evening was a success. Those watching from the table on the dais couldn't tell who was having the most fun, the students or the champs. Each table was a hive of conversation punctuated with gestures and laughter. On numerous occasions hands were seen weaving through the air, describing various aerial maneuvering not unlike that which might be seen at a muggle fighter pilot school. After the meal was concluded the question and answer period served as an expanded venue allowing those at other tables to interact with the other flyers and vice versa. By the time Charlie announced that the evening had come to a close it was apparent that everyone involved had just made memories for a lifetime.

Other special events during the camp included a flying exhibition by representatives of the Nimbus broomstick company that included a display of aerial acrobatics that had everyone gaping as well as the red team/blue team competitions with the Holyhead Harpies. These occurred during the second week and Harry was in attendance for the entire time. He, like the others, sat open mouthed and wide eyed at the amazing maneuvers that were being demonstrated. The last aerialist to perform came to a hover in front of the audience who were still applauding loudly. She raised her arms to signal for some quiet and when the noise had died down she said,

"Thank you, everyone, for your attention and appreciation. Just as a reminder, please don't try anything you've seen today without strict supervision. We've been doing this for a long time. Now, there's one maneuver that we would like for you to see today but despite a lot of trying no one on the team has been able to master it. But we're lucky in that the originator and apparently only practitioner of this unique move is here with us today," she said with a smile as she looked at Harry. "What do you say, Mr. Potter? Would you be willing to demonstrate the Potter bootleg for us?"

The crowd went wild and with a few nudges from various members of his family that he was sitting with he agreed with a nod and shrug. As he stood up he turned and said,

"It's been a while so I'm not sure how well this is going to go."

This got a few chuckles and some shouts of ‘show ‘em how it’s done, Harry’. He walked down to the pitch and retrieved his Firebolt from a rack and mounted. He took a couple of slow turns around the stadium and once he felt comfortable he added a bit of altitude and really leaned into it. He made a sweeping high speed turn over the goals at the far end and rocketed back over the field until he was at center pitch directly in front of the spectators. As he had in the past he pushed down, pulled hard left and pushed the image of the final position into the broom. In less than a heartbeat he was facing the other way and heading down at a shallow angle. He felt a minor twinge in his left knee as it was forced to absorb some of the momentum of the abrupt change in direction but other than that it went off perfectly. He swooped in and landed and to the sound of applause from the audience and the members of the demonstration team he climbed back up into the stands.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter,” the aerialist witch said. “You make it look so easy but I can tell you all from sad experience that it is an incredibly difficult maneuver. Thank you all again and good flying,” she said by way of concluding the exhibition.

Two days later the Holyhead Harpies arrived to take part in the day long series of practice matches. Ginny made sure she was there and there was a very enthusiastic reunion with her former teammates, not that she had been gone all that long. After several minutes of intense conversation she was persuaded to don her old team flying robes and take part in some of the games. The Harpies would be the red team, using a mix of regulars and reserves while the students were divided into a series of blue teams. Each match was to last no more than a half an hour with some time at the end given over to critique by the Harpies and the camp staff. Lunch was provided at the stadium and the matches didn’t finish until the sun went down.

That evening at dinner there was a special guest speaker. Glynnis Griffiths, the seeker for the 1953 Harpies team that played a seven day long match against the Heidelberg Harriers, considered by many Quidditch experts as one of the finest matches ever played, gave a talk on this marathon event. Although well into her seventies her memories were crystal clear and she gave a fascinating lecture that had the audience enthralled. After her presentation she was quite

gratified at the number of students who approached her from autographs.

The last Saturday was given over to student on student competitions. Friday was used to draw up four teams and give them time for some practice and familiarization. Two teams competed on Saturday morning and the other two in the afternoon. It was evident to all who were in the stands that the individual levels of performance were greatly improved and as made up teams they performed very admirably. Ron was sitting next to Harry during the afternoon match watching the two sides battle back and forth, the guest referee being Ginny. Ron leaned toward Harry and said,

“You know, Harry, it really is amazing how much some of these kids have improved. It’s a shame they all won’t be able to play on a house team.”

“I know, Ron, but even with reserves there isn’t enough room in the house programs.”

“I was thinking. Do you remember how Dean Thomas used to go on and on about that muggle sport football?” Ron asked.

“Oh yeah, how could I forget,” Harry replied with a smile.

“Well, one time when he was trying to explain it all to me he mentioned that there were lots of amateur clubs for adults and in schools they kind of had the same thing where students who weren’t playing on the official school teams could put together their own and play against each other. What was it called, something like intra..intramuriel or something like that. Maybe they could do something like that here at Hogwarts.”

“Sounds interesting, Ron, but if you had that many more games to play, I don’t know how you’d fit them in,” Harry replied.

“Why not do what we did during the camp? Limit the playing time to two hours or so and you could fit in two or three games on a Saturday,” Ron suggested.

“Hmmm, it’s an interesting idea. It would sure give the other students a chance to play. Let’s mention it to Bill and he can discuss it with the Head and Madame Hooch.”

Ron just smiled in response. The camp came to an end with a final dinner on Saturday night. All the students and staff were there as well as a fair number of the guest instructors. For this event everyone was seated at the student tables and the meal was almost secondary to the conversations that took place. Betty Hapnafl was having a serious discussion with a soon to be seven year witch who had shown exceptional skill as a keeper. In general, however, the conversations tended toward storytelling and anecdote swapping. By the time Charlie Weasley called the evening to an end it was universally agreed that the two week camp had been a resounding success and that it needed to be an annual event.

Sunday was something of a free day as the rest of the students weren’t due to arrive until Monday. Harry had decided to remain and do a few bits of business. Ginny had gone home early that morning so she could help Abigail pack and get her to King’s Cross station on Monday morning. After a quick breakfast Harry took a walk down to Hagrid’s hut. As had become the norm Harry was met by the bounding bulk of Norbie as he got closer. The big dog came to a halt and waited until Harry gave him a few well placed scratches around his ears eliciting some happy growls. Then Harry continued walking on with the Mastiff happily trotting alongside.

“Harry, how ya doin’? From what I could see ya had yerself a great time with the kids,” Harry’s friend said with a big smile hidden behind his scraggly beard.

“Yes, we did, Hagrid,” Harry replied. “It was really great. I think Charlie and Bill had the most fun, though. I don’t think they realized how much they missed Quidditch.”

“I know what ya mean, Harry. Them two used to live that game. It always amazed me that they did as well with their school work as they did. C’mon in and have a cuppa.”

“Thanks, Hagrid, that would be great,” Harry said as he stepped inside. “How have things been around here? Have you heard anymore from the Centaurs?”

“Nah, not a word. Makes me a little edgy. Feels like the whole forest is holdin’ its breath.”

“I don’t think I like the sound of that. I guess I’m going to have to keep my eyes and ears open,” Harry said thoughtfully.

Later on he stopped by to visit Neville and Professor Sprout. They were both busy getting the instructional areas of the greenhouses ready. Neville was the first to notice him.

“Harry! It’s great to see you mate. How did the Quidditch camp go?”

“It was great, Nev. I’m not sure who had a better time, the students or the instructors. We’re hoping to make it an annual event. How are things going here for you?” Harry asked.

“We’re doing good, Harry. We’ve been busy the last couple of weeks getting the greenhouses ready for classes but we’ve also been working on the medicinal plants. I know I’ve said it before but your support has been a wish come true for us.”

“I’m just glad I can help, Nev,” Harry said with a small smile.

His next stop was the Head’s office. Even though it was a Sunday there was plenty of work to do getting ready for the students’ arrival the following day. The entrance up to the Head’s office was open and Harry climbed the spiral staircase. When he reached the top he was met by Professor McGonagall.

“Harry, it’s good to see you. I understand all has gone well with your camp?”

“Yes, ma’am. I think we’re going to see a lot of improved players flying this year. It should be interesting to see how each house makes use of the extra talent. That reminds me, ma’am. Ron and I are going to talk to Professor Weasley about an idea Ron had. It might give the

students who don't make the house teams a chance to play some organized Quidditch," Harry said.

"Sounds very interesting, Harry. I'll be looking forward to hearing about it once you talk to Professor Weasley. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about, Harry?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'd like to talk to you and Professor Dumbledore if I could. Privately."

"Alright, Harry. I'll go speak to Albus. You meet us at the Room of Requirements," the Headmistress replied.

Harry smiled and then turned and started to make his way to that most versatile of rooms. With the original warning combined with Hagrid's disclosure that the Centaurs, the entire forest in fact, had gotten so quiet was a source of great concern so he was sure the room would respond accordingly. He was correct. When he opened the door there were the two comfortable chairs, the empty fireplace and the equally empty portrait frame. Harry stepped in and faced where the former Headmaster should be.

"Um, hello?"

"One moment, my boy," came a voice from one side of the frame.

After a moment the familiar visage of Professor Dumbledore walked into view. He regarded Harry with his calm eyes and gentle smile.

"Congratulations on the success of your instructional camp, Harry. I'm given to understand it went very well."

"Yes, sir, it did. Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves and the students learned a great deal. I even picked up a few pointers that would have been useful when I flew," Harry replied with a half smile.

"A number of your guests stopped by to pay their respects. It was a treat to see so many familiar faces. Quite a few of the old heads were very impressed especially when the Irish National team paid us a call. There were also many kind words on your behalf, my boy. They were

quite happy that you persevered despite the lack of help from the Ministry Sport office,” Dumbledore said with a grin.

“Well, most of the credit should go to Charlie and Bill Weasley. They did the lion share of the work getting everything organized,” Harry said but before he could go further Professor McGonagall arrived and Harry took the opportunity to change the subject.

“Sir, Ma’am, the reason I asked to talk to you was that something is going on in the forest. When I was here earlier in the summer Hagrid told me he overheard the Centaurs talking about me. They were calling me the Serpent King. Apparently they know about my other self. I wound up telling Hagrid about it. I even showed him.”

“You showed Hagrid, Harry?” Professor McGonagall asked in amazement then her face turned shrewd. “Hmm, that would explain why Hagrid spent so much time with that odd little smile he had all during the summer. Having a dragon as one of his closest friends would suit him to ‘t’ and that’s a fact.”

“Yes, ma’am. Anyway, the Centaurs were saying that they ‘saw’ that I was headed for some kind of big fight with one of my kin. We assumed they were talking about another dragon and not one of the Weasleys. Hagrid and I thought it might have something to do with the Department of Mysteries trying to come up with their own hybrid dragon like that one I fought. We’ve gotten some information to support that idea at the Ministry. On top of that, Hagrid just told me that since the beginning of summer things have been very quiet all over the forest. Like the whole place is holding its breath waiting for something to happen. I was wondering if either of you have heard or sensed something,” Harry concluded, his voice concerned.

“As for me,” the Headmistress said, “I don’t have much contact if any with the forest or its occupants. Hagrid is the most knowledgeable one there. I’m afraid I can’t be of much help in that respect, Harry.”

“As for me, my boy,” Dumbledore began, “there have been some strange undercurrents in the Ministry building, at least what I can feel during my times near the Wizengamot chamber. I will do my best to try and sort through it and determine if there is any information there.

I will enlist the aid of my predecessors that share the wall, they spend more time there and may know more.”

“Thank you, sir. I may have to make a concession and begin to experiment as you’ve suggested with the dragon. I can’t afford to be caught by surprise if something comes of any of this,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“I think that would be wise. Why don’t you and Minerva have a seat and we’ll discuss that a bit,” Professor Dumbledore said.

‘A bit’ as the Professor put it lasted for several hours. After their conversation concluded Harry was making his way down towards the Great Hall for no particular reason but it proved useful since he ran into Bill and Ron Weasley, who were having an animated discussion sitting at the senior end of the otherwise unoccupied Gryffindor table.

“Harry, good timing,” Bill said. “Ron was just filling me in on his idea for the club Quidditch games. It’s a brilliant idea, but we were going over some of the details. Depending on how many teams we could come up with we might have some trouble with officiating. I’m not sure if Madame Hooch would want to cover them all.”

Harry had taken a seat by Ron, more out of habit than by conscious decision, and looked at Bill.

“Well, I guess the first thing is to ask her, then if we find we need extra officials we could look to other members of the faculty that might be interested. Maybe even seventh years from the house teams might like to do some and we could put the word out and see if any of the folks that were guests during the camp might be interested, especially among the retired pros,” Harry said.

“We might have something there, Harry. We would probably just have to have Madame Hooch give a little lesson or two on how to do it. Just because someone has played the game doesn’t mean they know all the ins and outs, but it’s a good start. I hope you realize this isn’t something we could set up for the first term but we could probably do something for the Spring. I’ll have a talk with Charlie, I’m sure he’d like a hand in this,” then Bill laughed. “It’s likely to annoy

some of the old school purists who think that Quidditch should stay more exclusive but I think most people will find this really fun. I'll see you two later."

Bill got up and after giving his youngest brother a clout on the shoulder he strode off in search of the flying instructor. Ron watched him leave and then turned to Harry with a funny smile. Harry knew that Ron had always felt like he had been growing up in a shadow, either his brothers' or Harry's. Now that he was a Patroller with the likelihood of becoming a full Auror on the Special Tactics Squad and having just impressed his oldest brother with his idea for the club play Ron was feeling like he was coming out the shadows and standing on his own two feet. Harry gave his best friend a knowing smile and added his own slap on the shoulder.

Ron had to leave after a quiet dinner since he had duty the next morning. Harry chose to stay one more day and meet the students and witness the Sorting Ceremony. He spent a fair portion of the day talking with Bill about potential subjects for some lectures for the upcoming year. During a lull in the conversation Harry asked how Fleur and Victorie were doing.

"They're both doing very well, Harry. The little one has started to sleep through the night so that's a big help and even though things were kind of hectic during the summer planning and running the camp I was still able to be around a lot. In fact, Fleur was starting to complain I was underfoot too much. I get the feeling she's one of those mothers that think fathers aren't much use around an infant. Of course with school starting up I'll be away more. I suggested we rent a house in Hogsmeade but Fleur wouldn't even consider it. She said 'theese ees our 'ome and thees ees where our daughter weell be raised'," Bill said in a horrible imitation of his wife's accent. Harry did his best not to burst out laughing at his older 'brother' but it was a hard thing.

"Besides, Mum is spending a fair amount of time at the cottage so Fleur doesn't want for help when she needs it," Bill said, then gave Harry a sidelong look. "She did mention that she was a little miffed that a certain wizard was neglecting his duty to visit more often."

"Yeah, I know, Bill, it's just that I figure I'd be in the way and all," Harry replied a little shame faced.

"Harry, you and I know that's no excuse as far as Fleur is concerned. I strongly suggest you stop out there this week. I think it has more to do with how much she worries about you. She wants to see for herself that you're in good shape."

"Ok, Bill, if you say so," Harry said with an odd emphasis on the 'you'.

"If I say so, Harry?" Bill said curiously.

Harry looked embarrassed and said,

"Well, I dunno, Bill. Doesn't it bother you that she makes such a fuss over me?"

"I suppose it would make sense if it did, but all things considered it really doesn't. I know what her reasons are. We've had several long talks about it over the years. The first was while I was recovering from the attack that got me these," Bill gestured to his scarred face. "We talked a lot about the fight against Voldemort and how you were involved in it. It got a lot more intense after you finally beat him and then had your collapse," Bill said then paused and looked thoughtful for a moment before he continued.

"I don't know if you realize it Harry but Fleur lived a very pampered life. Her parents are pretty well off and with the veela heritage and her magical ability she was pretty much the queen of the student body at Beauxbaton. But when she came face to face with you and the reality of your life and all you had been subjected to and the sacrifices you made and were willing to make it really affected her world view I'd guess you'd say. She's absolutely committed to the idea that you deserve a quiet and peaceful life full of family and joy. You know she still absolutely hates the fact that you're the Chief of Magical Law Enforcement even if it's mostly an administrative job now. You should see her face any time she finds out you've been out doing field work. She thinks you should be here at Hogwarts living with Ginny in a house in Hogsmeade teaching and raising a family," Bill said smiling

then adding, "If she ever thought someone was a threat to you she be after them like all the demons of hell."

Harry had been listening to all of this with a very mild expression on his face even though his guts were twisting in a knot. He knew that his decisions affected other people but he forgot how intense some of those peoples' feelings could be. He let out a long sigh and was about to respond when they were interrupted by a voice from behind them.

"Ah, Professor Weasley and Mr. Potter. Just the two I was looking for," said Professor McGonagall. "Mr. Potter, unbeknownst to you I trust, I've been engaged in a conversation with your superior, Director Grimsson this summer, by owl of course, about his idea of you taking a sabbatical from your position at the Ministry to teach here. From what we have agreed to, if you are likewise agreeable I'd like to offer you that opportunity for next year. I would wish it to be this year but the Director feels you have certain, shall we say, irons in the fire that need to be attended to. Would you be agreeable, Harry?" the Headmistress asked.

Harry was wide eyed. He knew that this was something that he and Grimsson had spoken about but with everything going on it had slipped into a deep place in his mind. Now it came boiling back to the surface.

"Of course, I'd be agreeable ma'am. Would it be like before, as Bill, I mean Professor Weasley's assistant?" he asked.

"Not as such, Mr. Potter. I've given this a great deal of thought. Under normal circumstances we would be inclined to grant Professor Weasley a leave of absence and have you fill that position for the year. But with all the issues we've had in the past with DADA and it finally getting to be a stable program now I'm not inclined to do so unless the Professor has other ideas."

"No, ma'am," Bill replied, "I'm not interested in changing my situation but I'd really like to have Harry on board."

"I thought as such, so here is what I'm proposing. Since Harry has done such an admirable job these last few years teaching how the various aspects of magic tie together when it come to Defense Against the Dark Arts I'm going to suggest that he take on the assignment of Professor-at-large of Magic. Harry, I'm going to ask you to spend whatever time you can over the next year to work with Professor Weasley, Professor Flitwick, myself and any others as you feel appropriate to establish a year long program of study. Your one fixed duty will be to take the DADA first years again. Bill has been steadfast in his praise of how your original first years have been doing and the other professors have commented that most of them are stand outs in their courses as well. As to the rest we will work this year to structure something, most likely as an elective. I imagine it would prove to be much more worthwhile then divination or runes but to each their own. What do you think, Harry?"

"I think it's brilliant, Professor. This is fantastic, thank you," Harry said with great enthusiasm.

"Excellent. I'll pass that along to Mr. Grimsson and the Board of Governors. I daresay they'll be quite pleased to have you on staff even if it is for just the year, but it is a start," the Headmistress said with a sly smile.

When she had left Harry and Bill dove into an intense discussion of the possibilities. Late that afternoon Harry began to make his way down to the train station. He wanted to meet Abigail when she arrived. He hadn't seen her in a week and he realized he missed the diminutive witch a great deal. The sun had just set when the locomotive's exhaust became visible and in less then ten minutes it chuffed to a halt at the Hogsmeade station.

As students began to pour out onto the station platform there were many waves and shouted greetings to Harry, or more accurately, Mr. Potter. He waved and smiled back as he scanned the mass of students for that one special face. He could hear Hagrid calling out to the first years to assemble around him for their trip across the lake. Finally Harry caught sight of Abigail at the same time she saw him and he watched as she dodged between her classmates to reach him.

Apparently she had been taking lessons from Ginny since she hurled herself at Harry and he caught her up in a hug.

“Hello there, little one, how are you doing?”

“Hello, Harry, I’m mean, sir, umm...oh heck, hiya Harry,” she said with a laugh as she tightened her grip on him.

Harry squeezed back and then set her down on her feet. He looked down into a bright smiling face with those big dark eyes and thought of how that frightened first year had grown into an intelligent and apparently happy young woman. He smiled back.

“It’s so good to see you again, Harry. Thanks for meeting me. Are you coming back up to the castle?” she asked in that breathy voice.

“Yes I am. I’ll be going home after dinner. I wanted to see the Sorting Ceremony. I’m going to ride up with you if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” she said as they began moving towards the waiting coaches.

“Your painting has been up a couple of weeks now, what’s the reaction been?” Harry asked.

“Sort of mixed, Harry. Pretty much everyone thinks the painting itself is really good. I’ve gotten a bunch of messages congratulating me. The Aurors, Tom and Reggie and a bunch of others at the Ministry. They even did an editorial about it in the Prophet. They said something about the painting being the work of a true talent but they questioned the Minister’s wisdom about trying to push his agenda for change within the Ministry onto the greater magical community. Something about offending traditional sensibilities or some such. It was almost as dumb as that thing they wrote about you being near dead,” Abigail said with some heat.

“I’m sure he knows what he’s doing and that he expected to have some problems. He had more than a little bit of resistance when he started to reorganize things,” Harry said as they climbed into a carriage.

Since many students were already at the school thanks to the camp there was room to spare but two more students piled in behind them. Harry recognized them as new fifth years who had started out in his DADA class. He nodded and smiled,

“Hello Miss Wellington, Mr. Smythe. I hope you had a good summer.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Potter,” the young witch responded then looked at Abigail. “Hi Abigail, I didn’t get to see you on the train but I just wanted to say it’s so cool about you and that painting in the Ministry Atrium. I read about it in the Prophet and my dad saw it just the other day when he was there. He said it was fantastic.”

“Thanks,” was all she said as she blushed rosily.

Harry just smiled and listened as the three students exchanged some small talk as they rode up to the castle, pulled by the spectral thestrals. It wasn’t too long before the carriages discharged their passengers and the Great Hall began to fill with the sounds of excited students. Harry gave Abigail a last hug then made his way to a seat at the head table that had been set aside for him. Once the students had been seated and settled down Professor McGonagall welcomed them from the podium and then asked Professor Sprout to bring the first years forward to begin the ceremony.

As usual there was the mix of expressions, awe, anticipation and fear. Harry couldn’t help but smile and in one or two instances when a pair of eyes would cross his he would nod and try to smile a little encouragement. They all listened to the song of the Sorting Hat that spoke of the qualities of each house but emphasized that the strength of the school lay in the melding of those qualities and the sharing of experience. Harry thought it wasn’t just the Minister that was looking for change. By the time he had left for home that evening he was feeling very much at peace.

When he reported for work on the following morning he found that he would be spending most of the day catching up on what was going on around the building and the wizarding community at large. He spent close to an hour with Tom Medford going over reports and a list of

items that required his action or approval that had accumulated in his absence. When that was done he met with Maxwell to discuss the progress of their investigations and whatever new had come up.

“Before we get started, sir, how did things go? Any stars in the making?” Maxwell asked.

Much to Harry’s surprise, when the idea of the camp first got some public attention, he discovered that his deputy was quite the avid Quidditch fan. He realized he missed the hint when he was first introduced to Maxwell the day he was going to assist in the arrest of the ‘source’ and that his exploits as a flying phenomenon were well known to the Aurors.

“There were a few bright spots, one or two that might make it to the pros. Some of the younger ones show some promise too but it will likely take some years of playing and more camps to know for sure.”

“So you’ll be doing it again then?” the deputy asked.

“Oh yes, that’s the idea. Bill and Charlie Weasley are already working on next year’s event,” Harry said with a smile.

Maxwell simply nodded and then moved on to brief Harry about what had been going on. Nothing new had emerged about the situation in Europe. The muggle authorities apparently were working on the theory that it was some sort of radical terrorist activity. The magical side of the law enforcement community was searching for any junior leadership of the smugglers but had come up empty handed so far. Those that were in custody had offered up quite a bit of information but it only went up so far and then stopped dead. Apparently they were only privy to low to mid level operational efforts and nothing beyond that. Closer to home several dark arts practitioners were under surveillance but they didn’t appear to be anything more than common trouble makers.

“There is one thing that we are starting to hear about, Chief. Between Milligan and his people and things that are being reported by the patrollers, we’re picking up an undercurrent of, I don’t know, tension, I guess you’d call it about this whole equality business of the Minister’s.

Around mid-summer word must have gotten out about what you and Miss Granger, I mean, Mrs. Weasley were doing and then when the new painting was put in the Atrium it really became noticeable. It would appear to be a small but very vocal minority of 'traditionalists' that are making all the noise. Right now I'd say it was something to keep an eye and ear open for but not to worry too much about."

Harry nodded and said,

"Yes, I saw Abigail last night up at Hogwarts and she mentioned the editorial in the Prophet. She was thrilled about what was being said about her work, but she was really annoyed at the attitude about the subject matter. Despite the hardships in her life she still sees people mostly as 'good' and she's not all that familiar with the idea that even good people can have some pretty nasty thoughts in their heads."

Maxwell nodded and said,

"Well, they got the talent part right. We knew she could draw, what with some of the things she's shown us but those paintings were amazing."

Harry nodded and they continued on with the business of the day. Next to see Harry was Milligan. He spoke in low tones about his efforts to ferret out more information on the activities of the spooks and their dragon project. It was coming to him in bits and pieces but it was starting to add up. A friend of his in the transportation department confirmed that several shipments had left the lower level 'dungeon' of the Mysteries Department and were taken off to the northwest which seemed to point to the Hebrides as the location of the secret facility. A contact in finance mentioned that galleons had been converted to Euros and were sent to a German University for undefined consulting work.

Harry chose not to mention what he was being told about the goings on in the great forest but a picture was starting to form in his mind and it was not one he was very pleased with. When he returned home that night his mood was a bit somber but as always Ginny was able to brighten his outlook. The dinner that Kreacher had prepared was delicious and they passed the time in pleasant conversation

about the Quidditch camp and Ginny's efforts in locating a suitable plot of land for them to build their house. Harry broached the subject of the sabbatical and Ginny thought it was a wonderful idea.

If the house was ready by then he could commute easily enough and if not perhaps they'd find something to rent up that way. After they finished dinner they retired to Harry's study where Ginny worked on her notes for the journal on Harry for a bit while he tried to catch up on his reading. It wasn't too long before Ginny closed her journal and put down her pen. She gave Harry a 'look' and then stood up and took his hand to pull him up out of his chair. She didn't intend to miss the opportunity implicit in a relatively quiet house after his lengthy absence. He smiled and they walked out arm in arm.

Harry left for work the next morning in a decidedly happy mood. It lasted until mid morning when Tom stuck his head in the doorway, his face a mask of dismay.

"What is it, Tom?" Harry asked.

"You've got to come at once, sir. To the Atrium," Tom said all out of breath.

"What's going on in the Atrium?" Harry asked as he stood up.

"It's...I...I can't say, you just have to come, please hurry," Tom said and then he was gone.

Harry followed after and when he reached the lobby, lined with its fireplaces and elevator doors, he saw a large group of apparently very agitated people standing in front of the panels of the mural that Abigail had painted, or more accurately the remains of it. As Harry pushed his way through crowd what he saw shocked and appalled him. The canvasses and the images that had been so carefully and lovingly created upon them were destroyed. There was almost nothing left of the images of the magical species and more than half the canvasses themselves were gone, as if dissolved. Near the bottom were gooey masses of what looked like paint that had run together. On the stone floor in front of the panels was more of the

lumpy mess and some spots of an oily looking substance. Harry snapped into 'cop' mode almost immediately.

"Ok, everyone, I'm declaring this a crime scene. No one is to touch anything. Anyone who saw or heard anything to do with this is to remain so that statements can be taken," he said as he looked around and saw Tom and Reggie standing near the edge of the crowd.

He pointed at them and said,

"Tom, go get Milligan, Reggie, get the Deputy."

He then turned his attention back to the crowd and said,

"If you don't have anything to tell us please go about your business. You'll be of more help by not being in the way or contaminating any evidence. Please leave the area."

The crowd began to disperse partly because they had other business to attend to and partly because no one who couldn't be of help wanted to be anywhere near Harry with the look he was currently wearing. It took about ten minutes before Maxwell and Milligan plus several other Aurors hustled up to Harry. Maxwell was the first to speak.

"What in Merlin's name happened? That poor girl is going to be devastated when she finds out."

"Yes, and I'm going to have to go and tell her. I don't want her finding out from someone else. I want this area sealed off. Have someone interview those witnesses and I want samples taken of that gooey mess and that oily stuff on the floor. Get some samples around the edges of what's left of the canvas and anything else you think might help. I want the bastard that did this and I want him now," Harry said in a voice that his subordinates had come to fear.

"Yes, sir, we're on it."

With that Harry stepped away from the group and Disapparated to the outskirts of Hogsmeade. He walked with some haste to the door of the castle and let himself in. It was getting close to lunchtime so he set himself in the foyer and tried to compose himself but for those few who had the less than good fortune to walk by him they could see he was very upset. Someone must have alerted the Headmistress for she was hurrying in his direction as the first group of students began to make their way to the Great Hall.

“Harry, what is it? From that look on your face I’d have to think something terrible has occurred.”

“Yes, ma’am. It has and I need to speak to Abigail. There she is. I’m going to need an empty room, I don’t think this is going to be good,” Harry said bleakly.

Professor McGonagall merely nodded and said,

“Take the small classroom that you’ve used before. I’ll see that no one disturbs you.”

Abigail had seen Harry from behind and hurried up excitedly.

“Hiya, Mr. Potter, sir,” she said with an impish grin but when Harry turned the grin slid off her face and she started to get that vacant look that meant she was going to read someone.

“Stop, Abigail,” Harry snapped and startled the little witch back to the here and now. “Not here, not this time. Please come with me.”

Taking her by the hand he led her to the small classroom beyond the Hall and closed the door behind them. After taking a few steps inside Harry turned and looked down at her.

“Abigail,” he began and then took in a breath. “This morning, someone came into the Atrium of the Ministry and destroyed your paintings. They threw something on it that dissolved all of the images and a good deal of the canvas. There’s almost nothing left,” he said, trying to hold back the anger that was building up inside him.

“But why, Harry, why would someone do that?” she asked, her soft voice a mix of anguish and disbelief.

Harry went down to one knee so that they were more eye to eye.

“We’ve been hearing about a very vocal group that is very unhappy with the Minister’s ideas about equality and it appears someone decided to do something more than talk. I’m so, so sorry, little one.”

He looked into those deep dark eyes and saw them fill with tears but he also saw a little bit of the light go out in them. He reached out and pulled the small witch to himself and held her as she began to cry. As before her crying was louder than her voice had been but unlike the first time he was not hearing the wailing agony of a child fearing abandonment and no future. As a voice in the back of his mind began to roar with the need for vengeance for this attack on his family a calmer portion knew that what he was hearing was the sound of a young woman’s heart breaking. As was his.

Harry's Future, Part 28

Harry sat in his office staring at the photograph of his family that Ginny had arranged for. Sensitive to his mood the figures in the picture looked back at him with expressions of concern. Abigail was nowhere to be seen. The fingers of Harry's right hand were tapping out a restless tattoo as his eyes drifted to the clock that was just reaching seven in the evening. Milligan was due with a report on what his investigators had found out so far on who was responsible for the destruction of the paintings that Abigail had created for the Minister to highlight his campaign for species equality. If anyone had been in the room with him they would have felt noticeably warmer than if they were in the hallway outside, or in any other part of the building. Harry was about to get up to go looking for his chief of investigations when the tall lanky wizard appeared in the doorway.

"Well?" Harry asked pointedly.

"We don't have him, but we do have his trail. When he left by the floo network there was a witch at the fireplace next to him who heard him say the name of a small shop in Knockturn Alley that we've had some issues with but never were able to close up. We interviewed the owner. He confirmed a wizard in a full length grey cloak that matched what the witch thought she saw entered the shop through the fireplace and then fled. After some digging along the alley we found a couple of witnesses that thought they recognized the guy. We have half a dozen investigators checking out where he might be hiding," Milligan finished.

"Who is he?" Harry asked quietly.

"He was identified as one Pontificus Lestrangle," Milligan replied.

Harry bolted upright in his chair at the sound of the last name.

"Lestrangle?"

"Apparently he's some cousin or other of Rudolphus Lestrangle, Bellatrix's husband. From what we can figure he's a pretty down and

out pureblood that holds to the old ways. It seems to fit the bill," Milligan said.

"It certainly does. I tend to forget that there were plenty of family members of the Death Eaters still around after Riddle fell. Ok, get his name and description out to everyone and make sure they understand I want him in one piece," Harry said quietly. "How long he stays that way is another matter."

"Chief," Milligan chided gently.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But I can still think it," Harry said angrily.

Milligan nodded and left. Harry let out a long breath and left the office. He hadn't noticed the beads of sweat that had formed on Milligan's forehead while he was standing in the office. He entered the lobby where the damaged canvasses were roped off. He could only shake his head as he Disapparated to his front porch. Kreacher opened the door and looked at his employer with large, sad, liquid eyes but said nothing. As Harry hung up his robes Ginny hurried down the corridor.

"Harry, for crying out loud, what happened? I got a message from Mum that said someone had ruined Abigail's paintings? How could that happen?"

"Apparently, a wizard came through the floo network with a container of some kind of liquid. He threw it on the paintings and then fled through a fireplace. The liquid dissolved all the paint and about half the canvass. Milligan's people have a line on him and they're after him. Some character named Pontificus Lestrangle," Harry told his wife.

"Lestrangle? Death Eaters?" she said horrified.

"I don't think so. Milligan said he was some cousin or something. He's apparently a pureblood but with no money or family connections. They're on his trail so I'm hoping we'll have him soon," Harry concluded, feeling tired after a long, emotional day.

"Abigail knows?" Ginny asked.

“Yes, I went up and told her shortly after it happened.”

“Oh, Harry,” she said as she wrapped him in a tight hug. “You always bear the burden. Do you think I should go up and see her?”

“That might not be a bad idea, but tomorrow after classes. When I left she was on her way to class after lunch. She’s said she couldn’t afford to let it distract her. But I think it was the other way around. She wanted something to take her mind off her troubles. I need to go up Saturday to start talking about my class for next year so I’ll stop in and see her. I’m sure there will be plenty of people keeping an eye on her,” he said.

Ginny nodded and then pulled away from her husband and taking his hand, led him into the kitchen. As miserable as he was feeling he realized he was very hungry. He hadn’t had lunch and his anger burned up a lot of energy.

The following morning Harry was in his office for perhaps an hour when his deputy stuck his head in the door.

“I think we have our man, Chief. Do you want to see him?” Maxwell asked.

“Oh, yes, I do, very much,” Harry said as he quickly stood up and made his way to the door.

Maxwell stepped back and let Harry lead the way to the detention area. It didn’t take long since Harry was moving just shy of a run. As he approached the door he saw Milligan standing there, almost like he was blocking the way.

“Morning, Chief. We caught up with Lestrage early this morning. He was hiding out in a little shack on the moors in Yorkshire. We found some containers of various materials that he used for making that...whatever it was. We collected everything to be analyzed. We suspect some of it is on the banned list,” Milligan said and looked like he was going to continue.

“Milligan, are you trying to keep me from seeing this character,” Harry asked.

“I just thought that I’d give you a chance to calm down. You had ‘that’ look on your face coming down the corridor.”

“What do you mean, ‘that’ look?” Harry asked.

“The one that means you’re ready to take someone’s head off, starting at the feet,” the lanky wizard said with a small smile.

Harry snorted at the other wizard’s words but took the time to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he looked at his subordinate and with a flick of his head told him to move out of the way. Milligan stepped aside and then fell in behind next to Maxwell as Harry went further down the corridor and came to a stop in front of the door to the first holding cell. The guard on duty nodded and then unlocked the door and swung it in. The wizard that sat on the bunk bed across from the door looked up at Harry. It was obvious this was no Death Eater. He lacked the arrogance and menace. Instead he was haggard and disheveled. He was likely in his mid forties or so but they looked to have been tough years. His robes were faded and threadbare. Unlike his encounter with Lucius Malfoy he didn’t see a wealthy pureblood pulled low. There was no rich embroidery on the old robe, it was just a plain garment that had seen better days but probably couldn’t remember when. This was a pureblood wizard that never knew better days.

“Mr. Lestrangle,” Harry began. “I presume you’ve been informed of the charges against you.”

“I know what you claim I’ve done. I know that what I did was simply to strike a blow for tradition. The proper tradition for magic folk,” he replied.

“Proper?”

“Yes, proper, Mr. Potter,” he said, sneering Harry’s name. “Wizards and witches standing atop the magical world and the lesser species keeping their place.”

Harry chose not to respond, he simply kept his gaze on the wizard and his temper in check. A tiny part of his mind was suggesting that this poor excuse for a wizard deserved to be turned into a pile of ashes.

“Glare at me all you want, I’m not afraid of you,” Lestrangle said.

“Then you’re a bigger fool than I thought you were, Mr. Lestrangle, because right now you should be afraid. The artist who created the paintings you destroyed is a member of my family and rather popular around here,” Harry said in a quiet voice that was speaking volumes to his subordinates.

Lestrangle was starting to look a little uncertain as he looked around his cell.

“Don’t get too upset, Mr. Lestrangle. I’m not the law, luckily for you. I merely work to uphold it and as such you’ll be held until you can be brought before the Wizengamot, which I imagine shouldn’t take too long,” Harry said as he turned to his two underlings. “Have Mr. Lestrangle held here until we get a trial date. Then we’ll know if we have to transfer him to Azkaban. And understand that nothing happens to him in the mean time. No accidental falls or anything like that, am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” both men replied firmly but looking like they’d prefer it otherwise.

Harry nodded and then turned around and left the cell. He was angry, but unlike such past episodes he didn’t feel it escalating. He walked past his office and continued on till he reached Hermione’s office. He knocked and heard a questioning voice.

“It’s Harry.”

He heard footsteps and then the door swung open.

“Harry. Come in and sit down,” she said.

"Thanks."

"How are things going, Harry?" Hermione asked as she moved back to her chair.

"Only moderately awful now. We caught the wizard that destroyed the paintings, but that doesn't bring them back or fix Abigail's broken heart," Harry said.

"I don't mind telling you, Harry, those paintings made me cry. Once when I first saw them and then again when I heard about them being ruined. They were so amazing, the renderings were so lifelike and the message so clear. Who did it?" she asked.

"A fellow named Pontificus Lestrangle."

"Lestrangle?" Hermione asked as she sat forward in her chair.

"Yes, some cousin of sorts of Bellatrix's husband. He's no Death Eater but his opinions lean in those directions. Superiority of wizards and witches and the other races needing to be kept in their place. For the sake of tradition," Harry concluded.

Hermione eyes tightened and then she looked at Harry closely.

"How about you, Harry? How are you handling all this?"

"What? You mean my temper?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"Let's say that it's elevated but under control. A little voice in here," Harry said as he tapped his forehead, "wanted him turned into a pile of ash, but it wasn't a very loud voice."

Hermione just nodded, then asked,

"How did Abigail take it? My guess is that you went up to tell her."

"Yeah, I did, how did you know?" Harry asked.

"Please, Harry. I've known you long enough to know how you feel about family. No matter how bad the news you'd be the one to bear it so you'd be the one to help whoever it was of us that you had to tell," she said with a sad smile. "I worry about how much of it you can handle."

Harry just shrugged his infuriating shrug and said,

"She was upset, of course, and cried for a bit but it wasn't anything like the last time. She pulled herself together and insisted on going to her next class. I think she felt it would take her mind off of it. Ginny was going to go up this afternoon after class and I'll go up Saturday. I need to start work on my class for next year so I'll do both."

Hermione just nodded and added a sad little smile. Harry left a few minutes later and went back to his office. An hour or so later he received a message requesting him to come up to the Director's office. He began walking up, stopping to pop his head into Tom's closet of an office to let his assistant know where he was going and then made his way to his boss' office. The secretary saw him and said,

"You can go right in, Mr. Potter. Oh, and please tell Miss Westwood how terribly sorry I am about what happened."

"Thank you, I will," Harry replied.

Harry rapped on the door and then swung it inward.

"Ah, Harry. Come in and take a seat. I understand an arrest has been made," Grimsson said.

"Yes, sir. They brought him in early this morning. One Pontificus LeStrange, a rather down and out old school pureblood. He as much as admitted he did it when they brought him in. We're waiting for a trial date to see if we just hold him here or ship him off to Azkaban."

The Director nodded at first and then said,

“First of all, good work to you and yours on the quick arrest. Secondly, I trust that steps are being taken to make sure he arrives at trial in good order. I know how fond people around here are of the girl.”

“Yes, sir. I made a point of telling Maxwell and Milligan that I expected Lestrangle not to suffer any unfortunate accidents.”

“I would have thought as much but sometimes these things need to be said. I’ll send a note to the Minister to let him know of the progress in the case. What about that liquid he used, any word on it yet?” the Director asked.

“Not specifically. But based on the containers that were found in his hideaway and their contents we’re reasonably sure that some banned substances were included. Once we’re finished checking them out we’ll add any particulars to the charges. If all else fails I can always ask Professor Slughorn at Hogwarts to take a look,” Harry said.

“And what about you, Potter? This hit about as close to home as one could imagine.”

“I’m doing ok, sir. It’s under control. I saw Abigail yesterday right after it happened and I’ll be going up to see her on Saturday. That, if for no other, is reason to keep my cool.”

“Very well, Potter. Good work and keep me informed,” Grimsson said by way of dismissal.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied as he stood and left the office.

The rest of the day, and in fact the entire week, passed without further incident. The trial was scheduled for three weeks time and it was decided to send Lestrangle off to Azkaban, as much for his own safety, as for the convenience of the Ministry. Milligan had alerted Harry to some pretty grim grumbings coming from the rest of the Aurors. Ron Weasley’s grizzled old wizards’ chess partner was heard suggesting that they should just whip up a batch of whatever it was Lestrangle had used on the paintings and dip him head first into it. That at least had given Harry a brief laugh.

When he had spoken to Ginny after she returned from her visit to Abigail, she told him that there hadn't been any change. She was sad but determined not to let it interfere with her studies. In fact, the two had spent more time talking about the new house than anything else. Harry wasn't sure he liked that since he felt it might indicate Abigail was trying to suppress what she was feeling and he knew that wasn't likely to work out too well.

So it was on Saturday morning he kissed Ginny good bye. She and her Mum were going to go and take a look at several of the properties that Gringotts had located while Harry was gone. As was his custom he Disapparated to a spot near the memorial park and then walked up toward the main entrance to the school. As he neared the bottom of the steps he was greeted by several students who were coming down and he asked if anyone had seen Abigail. None of them had but one suggested he try Hagrid's since she had been down there several times in the last few days during free time. Harry thanked them and headed for the hut.

As he neared he noticed something out of place. There was no barked greeting from Norbie so he assumed he and his Master were out on an errand but he figured he'd check anyway. As he drew near to the hut he saw the big dog sitting calmly by the bench in front of the stone hut and Abigail sitting there, idly caressing the large blocky head and she looked out into the forest. Harry could hear Hagrid moving about inside his home.

"Hello, little one," Harry said as he approached.

She looked up at him with those big, dark, and now sad, eyes and gave a wan little smile.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry stopped on the other side of Norbie and lent an extra hand to the task of rubbing his head.

"How are you feeling this morning, Abigail?"

She sighed as she looked back out towards the forest and said,

"I'm ok, I guess. Well, actually, I'm feeling pretty stupid, really."

"Stupid?" Harry asked as he came around to sit on the bench beside her, being careful to leave a bit of space between them before he continued.

"I can't imagine how you could possibly feel that way."

"Maybe not stupid, exactly, but certainly foolish. Like a foolish little girl who doesn't know anything about the world," she said, her quiet voice sounding very serious.

"How so?"

"I always thought that the world had two kinds of people, good ones and bad ones. We were the good ones. The dark witches and wizards were the bad ones. But that's not the way it works is it, Harry? It's not just the good and the bad. There are all kinds of people with a whole mix of good and bad. I should have realized that when I saw what Mr. Maxwell was thinking about you but I didn't. But after the last few weeks, seeing what people were writing about my painting in the Prophet, the nasty comments about what the Minister was trying to do and then having the painting ruined. I made big mistake," she said sadly.

"What mistake was that?" Harry asked quietly.

"I started taking a look at the people around me here at school," she said, looking up at her guardian. "People smile and talk nice and are your friends but in here," she said, tapping the side of her head, "are those places where the dark thoughts are. It's amazing how many students here think that the Minister is wrong about treating all the magical species equally and it's not just Slytherins either. And there's the jealousies and vanity and laziness. You know I had one person ask me for some help with an assignment but what he was thinking was how to get me to do it all for him. I think you and the Weasleys spoiled me, Harry."

"What do you mean, little one?"

“You’ve always given to me without ever thinking about what I might give back. As much as I could have helped with your work, right from the start you always resisted because you were concerned about what it might do. You were right. At first it wasn’t bad because I knew that those smugglers and such were really bad people so it didn’t surprise me, but now, to see how regular people are, I wasn’t ready for that. I don’t know if I will ever be.”

“Abigail, no one is perfect, not the Weasleys and certainly not me. With the exception of a very few, we all have thoughts that aren’t very pretty. What matters is whether or not those thoughts become actions. I know you’ve had a pretty rude awakening,” he said as he extended his hand to her, which she took in both of hers and held to it tightly. “But in time I think you’ll be able to see that for most people their good side outweighs the bad. In the meantime I think you might what to, I don’t know, shut off, I guess, your gift until you start feeling better.”

He heard a soft, bitter laugh, possibly the least pleasant sound he had heard in a long time.

“It’s no gift, Harry. The more I think about it the more I’m convinced it’s a curse. And don’t worry. I’ve got it locked down as best I can. I didn’t even know you were around until you said hello to me. I don’t think I’ll be helping you with any investigations for a while, if ever.”

“I know that will disappoint a bunch of people at the Ministry but I don’t think I’ll be one of them. I never really did like the idea much in the first place and I’ll have plenty of opportunities to have you around so I’m ok with it. Does that mean you don’t think you’ll want to come work at the Ministry at all?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know, Harry. For now I’m just going to concentrate on my studies and continue with my artwork. I think I’ll do some work on animals and landscapes. I’ve been talking to Hagrid and he’s going to let me start sketching some of the creatures that he has around. I think I’ll start with Norbie here if I can get him to pose for me,” she said with a lopsided little grin.

This gave Harry some hope for his ward. That she wanted to continue with her art was a good sign and her last comment and the little bit of humor that it contained was certainly positive. He also felt Abigail shift a bit and closed the distance between them so she could rest her head on his shoulder. He gave her hands a squeeze and he began to ask her about the discussion she had with Ginny about the house. This conversation went on for about a quarter of an hour when Hagrid stepped outside with a tray and three cups of tea.

“Mornin’ to ya, Harry. How’s about a cuppa for ya and the young Miss Abigail?”

“Thanks, Hagrid, that would be great,” Harry replied.

“Thank you,” said a much smaller voice.

“So, Harry, I hear that ya will be with us full time next year,” Hagrid said.

“Yeah, that’s right Hagrid. That’s one of the reasons I’m here today. Professor McGonagall wants me to develop an elective class on the integration of various magical skills for defending against the dark arts. Sort of an expansion on Bill’s practical approach to DADA. I’ll also be teaching the DADA first years like I did before.”

“Well, it’ll be really summat ta have ya around the place all the time.”

“Yes, it will,” Abigail murmured.

Hagrid settled himself down on his front steps and gulped some of his tea. He exchanged a look over the top of Abigail’s head that indicated he too was concerned with the little witch and Harry understood that his old friend would be keeping an eye on her. That was worth a great deal to him.

After finishing his tea Harry said he needed to be heading up to the castle for his first meeting and he would look for Abigail before he left for home later in the day. Before he had a chance to stand Abigail wrapped her arms around him from the side and said,

“Thank you for being her for me, Harry. As always.”

“You’re welcome, little one,” he replied as he squeezed back.

As Harry walked back up to the castle he thought about what Abigail had said about her ability being a curse and not wanting to help with any investigations. He wondered just how life changing this whole mess was going to turn out for her. He didn’t have much chance to dwell on it as he spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon in discussion first with Bill, then Professors Flitwick and McGonagall about how best to approach this new endeavor. It surprised him in a way to realize that Professor McGonagall had not given up her task of teaching Transfiguration after being Head these past years.

“I know I probably should have, Harry, but quite frankly I couldn’t stand the idea of not teaching. Fortunately, with the school and things in general being so much more stable it hasn’t been that difficult to handle both tasks. Professor Sprout has been very effective as my deputy but she has become more heavily involved with the medicinal herbology work. Neville is a great help there of course but I may need to take another look at the whole situation for next year,” she said and then gave Harry a sly look. “You know, you’d make a fine Transfiguration teacher, Harry. I wouldn’t have thought it when you first started but after what you showed in your last year and since, you’d do a marvelous job.”

Harry smiled back at the Headmistress, who never seemed to miss a chance to try and entice him to a full time position on the faculty.

“Thank you, Professor. I think I’ll concentrate on next year’s work for now,” he said.

The Head just smiled in return. They were nearing the end of their consultations when a young wizard in training was admitted with a note from Hagrid that said Abigail was still down at his hut and would be until dinner. When Harry and the Headmistress had concluded their discussions Harry made his way down to say his goodbyes. As he approached he saw that at some point Abigail had gotten her sketch pad and was working on some renderings of Norbie. As was

usually the case, she was so absorbed in her work that she failed to see Harry come up beside her. He was still amazed at how lifelike her drawings were. What was even more amazing was how still Norbie was sitting in front of her.

“Summat ta see, ain’t it, Harry?”

Harry turned at Hagrid’s ‘whispered’ voice, which was still easily heard.

“Yes it is. I’m not sure which is more interesting. The drawings or the way Norbie is sitting. I haven’t seen him move a muscle.”

“Aye, it’s a puzzler. Them two jest seem ta click,” Hagrid responded.

Their conversation, as quiet as it was, managed to attract Abigail’s attention. She looked up at Harry and smiled.

“Hi, Harry. Getting ready to go home?”

“Yes, but I wanted to see you again before I left. I’ll be making frequent trips up, probably weekly as I work on this course, but if you need anything, even just to talk, you send a message and me or Ginny will be up to see you? Ok.”

“Ok, Harry,” she said with a small smile. “I know that I can always count on you two, if no one else.”

She set aside her sketch pad and stood up, Harry going down to one knee and they hugged. It lasted for a while, neither one seeming to want to let go, but eventually Abigail let go and stepped back.

“You shouldn’t ever wonder why we like to hug you, Harry. You do it better than just about anyone.”

He smiled and laughed a bit and then stood up and with a handshake for Hagrid he turned and began walking to the gates. As he walked, he thought it was interesting that the diminutive witch should find such friends as a giant dog and a half giant near wizard. He was

home in less than ten minutes. As Kreacher bowed him through the door Ginny came down the corridor to meet him.

“How’s our girl?”

“She’s not doing badly. Let’s go sit down and I’ll tell you all about it. Kreacher, do we have time before dinner?”

“Indeed, Master Harry. Kreacher will have dinner ready in an hour’s time.”

“Great, thank you,” Harry replied as he led Ginny to his study.

Harry took his spot in his cushioned chair and Ginny perched expectantly on the desk chair.

“I guess the best way to describe her mood is melancholy. From what she told me this incident has caused her to examine how she had been looking at the world and what she sees has really disappointed her,” Harry started.

He went on to relate what Abigail had said about her earlier view of good and bad and how her ‘looking’ at those around her altered that view. He talked about her not wanting to use her abilities, her curse, anymore if she could help it and how she just wanted to study and work at her art.

“She’s had her illusions shattered,” Ginny said with some dismay. “She’s never had an easy time of it but it wasn’t people who let her down, until now. But as long as she has you, Harry, I think she’ll get through it.”

“You mean us, don’t you,” Harry said as he held out his hand in invitation to Ginny to slip onto his lap.

“No, I mean you, my dear fellow,” she replied as she accepted the invitation. “Yes, she has me and Mum and all the rest but first, foremost and always, she has you.”

They sat like that for a few more moments, Ginny hugging Harry's head to her until she loosened her grip and leaned back a bit.

"On a happier note, I think we've found a spot for our home. It's an absolutely gorgeous tract of land not all that far from the Burrow, but far enough, if you know what I mean," she said with a sly little grin. "It has some open pasture, some woods, a little pond, not much in the way of immediate neighbors. I'd like you to come see it with me tomorrow."

"Bright and early?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Well, maybe not so early. It's been a long, troubling week for you. I think you deserve a special evening," Ginny said in that way Harry had come to love.

His answering kiss took most of the time until dinner was ready.

Bright but not all that early the next morning Ginny took Harry to take a look at the property she had told him about the day before. Their first stop was the Burrow. They popped into the backyard, broomsticks in hand, and went to the kitchen door. Ginny opened it and shouted inside.

"MUM, DAD, anyone home?"

Harry could only shake his head and marvel at how some things never change.

"Ginny dear, how lovely to see you. Is Harry with you?" Mrs. Weasley called back.

"Yes, Mum, I wanted him to see that property we looked at yesterday," Ginny replied as they made their way into the kitchen, meeting Mrs. Weasley coming from the living room.

"Harry, how are you doing? How is poor little Abigail getting on?" Mrs. Weasley asked, genuinely concerned.

"I'd say melancholy is the best way to describe it. She not anywhere near where she was when she thought she was going to be alone. But she's upset about the painting and what she's found out about the nature of people," Harry said and then went on to explain what Abigail had told Harry.

"It's a terrible thing for a parent to see a child's illusions destroyed. Reality comes to us all in time but children deserve to hold on to them as long as they can," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Fortunately she hasn't given up on her art. As long as she has that I think she'll be fine. She has taken to spending a lot of time at Hagrid's hut. She's started sketching Hagrid's dog. I'm hoping that will help ease the pain," Harry said.

"Well, you let that girl know she's welcome here any time if she feels the need," Mr. Weasley said.

Molly Weasley's feelings about Abigail were a bit confused. She couldn't figure out if she considered her another child or a grandchild. Not that it mattered how she treated the girl but it did confuse her orderly view of her family. She gave a small smile and then said,

"I hope that after you finish looking at the land you'll stop back for lunch. I don't see you nearly enough now that you're both living in London. Gets a bit lonely around the old place."

"We'll do that, Mum," Ginny said. "Come on, Harry, let's go."

As the two walked back out into the backyard Harry said,

"You're sure we won't be seen by any muggles, Gin?"

"It shouldn't be a problem, Harry. I didn't see any houses between here and there yesterday and there are plenty of trees so if we stay low it shouldn't be an issue. Just follow me."

Harry shrugged and mounted his Firebolt and he pushed off to follow his wife as she flew out across the field and beyond. It was a twisty, circuitous route but Harry found it to be great fun to match moves with

his nimble wife. He had to admit that she really was a fantastic flyer. After a flight of about twenty minutes Harry followed Ginny down to land in a meadow. To one side was a small but heavily treed wood. To the other side he could see what looked like a meandering stream that ended in a small pond. Beyond that were some low hills.

“What do you think, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“It’s beautiful, Ginny. It would be quiet and secluded. How big is it overall?”

“Around seven acres, I think, maybe a bit more. There is a road on the backside of those trees if we felt we needed to have access but other than that it’s pretty much what you see. I really like it,” she said.

“Me too, I’m sold. We’ll contact Gringotts tomorrow and start the negotiations. We can talk about house building when we get back to the Burrow,” Harry said.

“I’m so thrilled, Harry. Our own home. I know the house in London is ours but it seems like we just sort of borrowed it, you know? This will be what we want, what we designed. I hope I can still get Abigail to help with that,” Ginny said as she threw her arms around Harry and pulled him tight against her.

“I’d think so, sweetheart. I think she wants to keep her artwork going and this would be a good way to do it.”

“I’ll work on keeping her busy then. Let’s head for home, my love,” she said and then pulled his head down for a short but intense kiss.

They lifted off and took a short turn around the property. It looked even better from above. Harry could see the advantages of the open yet secluded pasture for flying practice, and woods and streams were also good for growing children to explore. He was liking it more and more. They landed in the backyard of the Burrow and laid their brooms against the house before entering.

“We’re back, Mum,” Ginny yelled in.

“Hello, my dears, that didn’t take long at all. It will be a while before lunch is ready. Harry, dear, why don’t you go out and get your father to come in. We can sit in the parlor and you can tell us what you have planned.”

“Ok, Mum,” Harry said as he turned around and went back outside.

He strolled out of the yard and took the path to the workshop where Mr. Weasley spent so much of his time. As he entered through the open garage door he had to smile. The pile of parts had been cleaned, refurbished and reassembled into a reasonable facsimile of a not so new 1955 Ford Popular. It was, however, far and away in better shape than it had been that day they saw it rattle down the road towards the Burrow trailing a cloud of pale blue smoke.

“Hello, Dad,” Harry said as he walked past the car.

“Harry, good to see you. I knew you were about, Ginny’s voice does carry,” Mr. Weasley said with a grin. “Does she yell like that at home?”

“No, there’s usually no one to yell at, plus I think she’s afraid she’ll wake up Mrs. Black’s portrait,” Harry said and they both laughed. “Mum wants you to come in so we can talk about plans for the new house.”

“Ah, excellent, let me just clean up a bit and we’ll go right back.”

In a short time the four were sitting in the spacious living room.

“So, son, what did you think of the property?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“I love it. I’m going to Gringotts tomorrow to ask them to begin the negotiations. I’d like to have them serve as intermediaries. It might help keep the cost down,” Harry said with a grin.

“Do you think your fortune is public knowledge, dear?” Molly Weasley asked.

"I doubt it, Mum, but I just have a feeling that if the name 'Harry Potter' is mentioned early on it will push the price up," he replied.

"You could be right, Harry," his dad began. "What do you have plan for the house then? Will you start building right away?"

"I don't know. Ginny and I need to discuss that. I'll be up at Hogwarts next year and we might rent something up that way and I don't know how long the design process will take but regardless I want to make sure we get the property, even if it takes a couple of years to sort out the house. We have time."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Harry," Ginny said. "I want the house perfect so we'll make sure the design is right before we start. Plus I think it will give Abigail something to work on."

They all nodded and continued discussing aspects of the house and property and what Harry and Ginny hoped to accomplish. Lunch followed and as always it was excellent. As they were finishing up Ginny looked at her husband and said,

"So, what do you want to do this afternoon, sweetheart?"

"You know, why don't we pop out to Shell Cottage and see Fleur and the baby. I'm probably going to get yelled at but I owe them a visit."

"Ohh, that's a great idea, Harry. And I don't think she's going to yell at you, much," Ginny said with a grin.

After lunch was done and the table cleared, Harry and Ginny said good bye to their parents and with brooms in hand Disapparated to the cottage. They walked up to the door and knocked. After a few moments the door swung open and Fleur was standing there looking beautiful but a bit harried as was usual for a new mother. She let out a squeal and threw her arms around Harry's neck and held on to him tightly. Harry responded with a tight hug of his own with some back rubs thrown in for good measure. After a moment one long slender arm reached out and pulled Ginny in for a group hug.

Finally Fleur's grip slacked off and she pulled her head back. She squinted at Harry and he braced himself for what he thought was to come.

"Eet ees wonderful to see you, 'arry. You 'ave been away much too long. Geeny, she visits me much more than you do. Please, come eenside."

"I know I should have come sooner, Fleur. I'm sorry," Harry said, relieved that her rebuke had been so mild. "How are you doing? Bill said the baby was sleeping through the night so that was helping."

"Oui, leettle Victorie ees being an angel lately. Eet 'as been very 'elpful and we take naps together een the afternoon. Come see 'er."

She led Harry and Ginny to the bedroom where the crib was tucked up against Bill and Fleur's bed. She was fast asleep, her pursed lips making little sucking movements. Harry could feel Ginny's hand tighten in his. He suspected the subject of children was going to be discussed again fairly soon.

"She's a beauty, Fleur. More so every time I see her," Ginny said.

"Yup," Harry added, "just like her mother."

He felt Fleur lean into him and then taking his hand led them back out into the little living room. Before she let Harry sit down she held him at arm's length and looked him over from head to toe. Then she locked eyes with him for a moment longer and then stepped back.

"Please, seet down, 'arry, Geeny."

Once they were comfortably seated, Harry and Ginny side by side on the couch and Fleur close on Harry's other side in a cushioned chair Fleur said,

"You are lookeeng well, 'arry. I theenk you need to eat more, though."

Ginny laughed. She looked at her sister-in-law and said,

"Fleur, he eats more now than he ever did. We never have leftovers no matter what Kreacher makes. He burns up energy at an amazing rate these days."

"The dragon, 'arry?" Fleur asked.

"Most likely," was all Harry said in reply.

Fleur merely nodded then said,

"And what of that detestable creature that ruined thee painteengs, 'arry? 'ave you captured 'im?"

"Yes, Fleur. We caught him the day after. He's a member of the Lestrangle family. A pureblood fallen on hard times who wants the old ways back. His trial is in a couple of weeks."

"Weell Abagail 'ave to be there?"

"She may. They might want to ask questions about how much time and effort went into the paintings. For destruction of property the value matters so they may need to try and establish that. They may also want some sort of impact statement, how the crime has affected her."

"Bill 'as told me that she is working very 'ard, but she ees not the same."

"He's right. I think the work is to keep her mind off it but she's very melancholy. I hope it's not a permanent change."

Fleur's expression at this statement was an invitation for further explanation. Harry described the discussion he had with Abagail and how her view of the world had been changed. Fleur's eyes tightened and her jaw clenched. When Harry finished she mumbled something in a stream of French that Harry knew was neither polite nor pleasant.

"I weell arrange for Mum to come watch the baby and I weell pay a visit to Abagail," Fleur said.

"I think she'd like that. If you go in the late afternoon after classes you'll probably find her at Hagrid's hut. She's taken to spending a lot of time there, drawing the animals. I get the feeling she prefers them to people right now."

"I can't blame her, Harry," Ginny replied.

"Eet ees deeficult to come to understand that your reality ees not the true one. I know thees for a fact," Fleur offered quietly.

Harry nodded, remembering what Bill had told him about how Fleur had had to shake off the preconceptions of her upbringing and face the harsher realities that Harry knew all too well. Perhaps realizing the visit had taken a somber tone, Fleur changed the subject to the Quidditch camp which led to Harry's sabbatical and then the house and property. About half way through the conversation Victoire woke up and demanded attention. Fleur and Ginny went into attend to her but the house was small enough that the conversation could continue.

Everyone got their turn to hold and play with Victoire. Harry crossed his leg and placed the infant in the hollow created so they could look at each other. The little girl's expression seemed almost serious as she gazed back at her uncle who returned the look with one just as serious. A coldish, reptilian voice in the back of his mind suggested that this small one was someone special and was deserving of his protection. Harry could only nod to himself. The exchange did not go unnoticed but Ginny and Fleur merely looked at one another. By the time the sun was setting Harry and Ginny were taking their leave of Fleur with promises to return soon.

In moments they were back on the porch and Kreacher was bowing them into the house. The wonderful smells of dinner met them as they walked down the corridor and to the kitchen. A thought popped into Harry's head.

"Kreacher, I have something to ask you."

"Yes, Master Harry?"

"Ginny and I are planning on building a new house, you know that, right?"

"Yes, Master Harry. Kreacher watched as Mistress Ginny and Miss Abigail made many drawings and talked much," the house elf replied.

"How will that affect you, moving to a new house?"

"Kreacher remembers once telling Master Harry that for a house elf it is important to live and work in the house where those he works for live. It is not the house that matters. It will be unfamiliar for a time but that time will pass and it will be home," he said.

Harry just nodded and then turned to his wife and said,

"You know, Gin, I think you're wasting your time on that journal about my life. You should be writing down what Kreacher says. You could call it 'Wisdom of a House Elf'," he said with a smile.

Ginny smiled and Kreacher gave him a funny look and then went ahead of them into the kitchen where he started to serve dinner. As they sat down Ginny looked across at Harry.

"You know," she began, "Fleur really misses seeing you, Harry."

"I know. Bill was talking to me about that not too long ago. I guess she still worries about me," he said then shrugged.

"Harry, I know you don't mean it that way, but don't shrug off someone's feelings about you. You are now part of a large and growing family. We all love you as I know you do us. Part of that is concern for your well being. Considering the scares you've given us these past years it's very understandable. You need to make the effort to let your family know how you're doing. You know, I think I'll take a second look at our ideas for the house. I think we'll need to make sure we have room for visitors. I think I want to encourage that."

Harry smiled and nodded a bit. He knew he was no expert in these matters and he would defer to Ginny's judgment. He ate the rest of his substantial meal in thoughtful silence.

In the time that passed until the trial of Pontificus Lestrangle, Harry's investigators amassed the evidence they would use against him. Samples of materials had been analyzed. Those few who knew him were interviewed. His movements were traced. It appeared that he had contact with some who felt as he did but that the actual crime was a solitary one and not the result of some greater conspiracy. Harry was certain that it had been applauded in some circles.

The day of the trial arrived and as Harry had supposed Abigail had been called as a witness. She used the Floo network to come directly to the Ministry and Harry met her in the Atrium. The canvasses had been taken down and were now in the chambers of the Wizengamot. Abigail didn't even look at where they had been. She took hold of Harry's hand then let it go. They then walked to the elevators and took one to the level where the courts were held. As they walked past the portraits of former heads of the tribunal he noticed that Professor Dumbledore was absent. The witch that Harry had conversed with on several occasions acknowledged the pair with a solemn nod that Harry returned.

When they entered the chamber a bailiff spoke to them briefly and directed them to a section near the front reserved for witnesses. Harry could see a fair number of people were present including Mrs. Weasley and Ginny, as well as several off duty Aurors and Patrollers. A few minutes later the members of the Wizengamot began to file into their places. The Chief Warlock appeared last. He was a rather ordinary looking wizard of average size and maybe fifty years old, that Harry had not seen before. He took his seat and then gavelled for attention.

"Please bring the defendant in," he said in a surprisingly deep voice.

Two bailiffs escorted the tired looking wizard into the room and directed him to the defendants dock. He stood there, looking quietly defiant.

“Pontificus Lestrangle, you stand accused of the following offences. First, that you knowingly and willingly trespassed on Ministry property with the intent to commit a crime. Second, that you knowingly and willingly caused the destruction of Ministry property, to wit, the newly acquired paintings of the magical races. Third, that in order to commit this act you knowingly and willingly obtained materials enumerated on the list of prohibited substances. How do you plead?”

“Guilty,” was all Lestrangle said.

The Chief Warlock merely nodded and turned slightly to the recording secretary to his left.

“Be it so entered into the record that the defendant has pled guilty to all charges. Before sentence is passed it would be prudent to briefly explore the impact of this crime. We would therefore request that Minister Shacklebolt please come forward.”

Harry turned and saw that the Minister had been standing in the back of the chamber. He must have slipped in after he and Abigail had entered. The Minister strode purposefully down the aisle and took his place in the witness dock. He faced the Chief Warlock.

“Minister Shacklebolt. Would you please explain to the court your purpose in commissioning the paintings in question?”

“Certainly. I am certain that most, if not all of us, are familiar with the fountain that used to occupy space in the Atrium. As you know it was destroyed in a battle between Voldemort, Professor Dumbledore and a few others some years ago. In my opinion it was the only thing Voldemort ever did that was worthwhile. I considered it a symbol of his way of thinking and I felt we needed to get past that. For some time now I had it in mind to replace it with something that was more emblematic of what I hoped would be our future, now that we were rid of Tom Riddle and his confederates. It came to my attention that there was a young and very gifted artist attending Hogwarts who also was a member of the family of a senior Ministry official. Under ordinary circumstances we would have most likely solicited proposals from interested parties and awarded the commission to the one judged best. I took it upon myself to circumvent that process because

I felt this youngster would bring a perspective to the project that was unsullied by preconception and bias. It was also my intent to keep the project under wraps so that the revelation of the work would be impactful. While I judged there would be those who would object to the message I underestimated the vehemence of this particular response. Otherwise I would have made sure it was protected.”

“Thank you, Minister. Do any members of the Wizengamot have any questions?” the Chief Warlock asked.

None responded. He then looked down at the wizard who was acting as the counsel for the defense.

“Mr. Counsel, as your client has already pled guilty do you have any questions for the Minister?”

“Just one,” he said as he rose. “Mr. Minister, you stated that your reason for commissioning this work of art in the unorthodox manner that you did, was for it to be a symbol or emblem of what you envisioned for the future of our community. Is that correct?”

“It is,” rumbled the Minister.

“What exactly is that vision of the future?” the defense counsel asked.

“That the lines between purebloods and those with significant muggle heritage be recognized as the foolish and arbitrary things that they are. Likewise, that the concept that witches and wizards are somehow superior to the other magical races also be set aside. I think we have seen the folly of that notion.”

“You would cast aside these notions, despite centuries of tradition?”

“Counselor, those centuries of tradition have only managed to produce the likes of Voldemort and Grindelwald, not to mention many others down through the ages. I think they are old ideas better left behind,” the Minister rumbled, eyeing the counsel.

The defense counsel was about to say something more but the Chief Warlock cut him off.

“Enough. The defendant has admitted his guilt. If you seek to mitigate the consequences by suggesting he was merely acting in defense of tradition, your arguments are falling on deaf ears. Mr. Minister, you are excused. Thank you for your testimony.”

Shacklebolt nodded in acknowledgement and then made his way back to a place near the rear of the chamber. Harry surmised that perhaps the Minister didn't want his presence to be seen as an attempt to sway the court.

“Next we shall hear from the artist who created the work that was destroyed. Will Miss Abigail Westwood come forward and be heard.”

Abigail stood up and looked at Harry and gave him a brief, if grim, smile. As she approached the dock a bailiff moved forward and placed a small platform for her to stand on so she would be more visible. She stepped onto it and gave the wizard a small smile. Then she turned to face the assembled judges.

“Miss Westwood, you were commissioned by the Minister to create the art work in question, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” came her barely audible reply.

“You have no need to be afraid, young lady, you are not on trial here today,” the Chief Warlock said.

“If I may, sir. That is Miss Westwood's normal speaking voice,” Harry called out. “I think I can help.”

He got up and walked up to Abigail and with his wand lightly touched her throat and said ‘sonorous’.

He gave her an encouraging smile and returned to his seat.

“Thank you, Chief Potter. Now, young lady, can you tell us how you received this commission?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, her voice still soft and airy but clearly audible now. “The Minister asked if I would come to his office to discuss a project. I was here to visit some people I had come to know.”

“I see. And the project was the paintings for the Atrium?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How did the Minister come to know of your talent, young lady? Did Chief Potter inform him in some way?”

It became clear to Harry that the Chief Warlock was using the proceedings to answer some questions about how this commission had been awarded.

“No, sir. I did the paintings on the walls of Angelina’s Ice Cream Haven in Diagon Alley several years ago. He said that he had seen them and asked the owner who had done them.”

At the mention of the images in the ice cream shop a number of the Wizengamot panel nodded and a low murmur began among those in the chamber. The Chief Warlock gaveled for silence and then continued.

“Is that all?”

“No, sir. Apparently he had also seen a portrait I had done in pen and ink of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Weasley. He said he thought that both works indicated I had talent and he wanted me to create a mural for the Atrium to replace the fountain.”

“How long did it take you to complete the commission?”

“Nearly all of the summer, sir.”

“How often did you work on it? Everyday, once a week?”

“Every day, perhaps ten to twelve hours a day,” she replied.

“I see. Counsel for the defense, do you have any questions.”

Harry tensed.

“Yes, sir. Miss Westwood, were you paid for your services?”

“Certainly.”

“Would you tell us how much?” the counsel asked.

“Two hundred Galleons.”

“So you did profit from the commission?”

“For a time.” she replied.

“For a time, Miss Westwood?” the Chief Warlock interrupted.

“I’ve asked my legal guardian to return the money, minus the expenses for materials.”

“You’re giving back the money you earned, Miss Westwood? Why?” the judge asked incredulously.

“I don’t feel right keeping it if the paintings aren’t there anymore,” she replied.

“I see. Anything else, Mr. Counsel?” the Chief Warlock asked.

“No, sir. That’s all.”

“Miss Westwood, it is customary in these cases to ask the victim of a crime to offer a statement about the impact the actions of the defendant has had. While technically this is a crime against the property of the Ministry, we feel that you, as the creator of that property should have an opportunity to make a statement. Would you care to do so now?” the Chief Warlock asked.

“Yes, sir. I guess in a way I should thank him for opening my eyes. I was living with a false illusion of the world and the people in it. The fact that all my hard work was destroyed was very upsetting but I’ll

have the opportunity to create more. But how I see the world has been changed forever and it's not nearly so nice a place as it once was. I guess that's all I have to say," she finished.

"Thank you, Miss Westwood. You are excused."

Abigail offered a sad little smile and then stepped off the platform and walked back over to Harry where she sat down next to him. He removed the 'sonorous' charm and then placed his arm around her shoulders. They watched as the judges conferred and whispered amongst themselves for a few moments and then the Chief Warlock turned to address the defendant.

"Pontificus Lestrangle. You have pled guilty to the charges brought against you. We have heard from the Minister and his reasons for commissioning the artwork you destroyed. We have heard from the artist who created it and the impact your crimes have had. Do you have any last statement to offer on your own behalf?"

"I offer no apologies to this court or this Ministry, for you have betrayed the very nature of wizardry and the natural order. My only regret is that you chose to involve this child and it is she that bears the scars that rightfully belong to you," he said and then turned to Abigail. "I am sorry, Miss, that you were brought into this."

Abigail looked back at the man and her eyes dulled for a moment and then she shook her head and said quietly,

"Your apologies mean nothing to me because they have no meaning for you. You offer them only as a way to excuse what you did. You are a stupid and small minded man, Mr. Lestrangle. Your life hasn't turned out the way you feel it should and you look to blame everyone but yourself," she finished and then turned away.

Lestrangle looked as if he had been physically struck. He was pale and shaken. The Chief Warlock looked closely at Abigail and then turned back to the defendant.

"Pontificus Lestrangle, for your crimes you are hereby sentenced to one year in Azkaban prison and you are fined treble damages of six

hundred galleons. Bailiff, take the defendant into custody. This hearing is closed.”

Lestrangle was led off by the bailiffs and the gallery waited until the Wizengamot panel left the chamber. Harry and Abigail stood up and began to leave and were joined by Mrs. Weasley and Ginny, both of whom gave Abigail hugs and offered words of encouragement and admiration for how well she conducted herself. As they neared the back of the chamber they were met by the Minister.

“You did very well today, Miss Westwood. I’m sorry that things turned out the way they have. I would offer you the chance to redo your work, but Harry has told me of your wishes and I’ll respect them. We’ll find another way,” the Minister said.

“I’m sorry, sir, but my heart just wouldn’t be in it and your ideas deserve more than that. I don’t know when I’d be willing to take on such a commission again, if ever,” she said quietly.

“So much the poorer are we then,” the Minister rumbled almost to himself.

Harry's Future, Part 29

Harry, Ginny, Mrs. Weasley and Abigail sat around the kitchen table in the Black house finishing up a late lunch. They had come home directly after the trial of Pontificus Lestrage was finished. No one said much during the meal, perhaps feeling it was merely enough to be there together to offer Abigail whatever support she might need. Harry finally broke the silence as Kreacher was gathering up the plates and cutlery.

"How are you feeling, little one?" he asked.

Abigail looked at him, took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh before answering.

"I'm doing ok, I guess, Harry. The bad guy is going to prison so I guess that counts for something. And it looks like any questions that there might have been about how I got the job were cleared up."

"You noticed that, did you?" Harry asked.

"Harry, please, those questions were about as subtle as a slap in the face. Besides, I saw what was in some of those letters to the Prophet. It was pretty obvious that the Chief Warlock was looking for a way to settle the matter one way or the other."

Harry nodded, again having to remind himself that the girl's diminutive body hid a very grown up mind.

"Do you think you might have been just a little harsh with that despicable man at the end, Abigail?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"It might have seemed that way, Mrs. Weasley, but that's because you couldn't see what he was thinking. It wasn't what he was saying. He didn't feel bad about me, he thought I was just some simple child and all he was trying to do was make the Minister look bad."

Harry gave a small smile and said,

"So what now?"

"I go back to school, keep on with my studies and fit in as much drawing and painting as I can. That reminds me, I brought a few things with me when I went back to school but I'd like to pick up some more from my room to bring back. I might need some help."

"I'll go back with you, Abigail," Ginny offered. "I want to make sure you get back alright. We can pack a couple of small bags."

"Thanks, Ginny. We should probably get started on it then, I'd like to be back for dinner."

"Sure thing. Let's go," Ginny said as she stood up and the two left the kitchen.

"She seems to be holding up pretty well, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said.

"So far so good. But we'll keep an eye on her for a while. I don't want another unpleasant surprise," he said quietly.

Later that evening after Ginny had returned and they had eaten a light dinner, Harry was sitting in his study at his desk working on the outline for his course. Ginny was sitting in the cushioned chair working on some notes of her own.

"Harry, I was wondering about something," she said.

"What's that, love?"

"What was it like for you to find out you were a wizard?" she asked.

Harry put down his pen, which he had started using more and more rather than a quill, and sat back, looking at the wall in front of him, thinking. Then he turned to his wife and said,

"Confusing, a little frightening, but in a way very exciting and reassuring. I don't know if I ever told you but when I was growing up in the Dursley house and going to the muggle school some odd things happened every once in a while. The time I found myself on top of a school building when I was trying to get away from Dudley

and his gang, or every time they cut my hair it was back like this the next day, and then that whole episode in the zoo with the snake. As unbelievable as the idea of wizardry was to me it answered the questions those incidents raised. I stopped feeling like an oddball and felt like I belonged someplace. Plus it gave me the opportunity to have friends and the first time I flew, that was amazing,” he said with a gleam in his eye, but that faded when another thought crossed his mind.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” Ginny said as she saw his change of mood.

“I don’t know how best to say this, but after having spent ten years with the Dursleys, with the constant criticism and bullying and belittling, to find out that I was really good at something, maybe better than anyone else around me, it’s hard to express that feeling. Then after having caught the snitch to win that first game, that sense of accomplishment,” he said and then smiled a little.

“I’ve never told anyone this before, Gin, but during all those hard times, the time we lost all those house points or everyone thought I was the Heir of Slytherin or that whole twiwizard mess, what kept me going wasn’t amazing courage or perseverance or any of that other stuff people have said. It was just thinking back to how I felt that first time standing on the pitch with that little golden ball in my hand and all those people cheering for me. Standing there and knowing that Harry Potter wasn’t some pathetic little loser like he had been told all his life,” he finished up, his voice having trailed off to barely a whisper.

Ginny was looking at him, her beautiful brown eyes filling with tears, silently cursing that trio of muggle fools for all the hurt they had caused him. She was also cursing herself for having brought up the issue; it wasn’t like he didn’t have enough to trouble him.

“I’m sorry, Harry, I didn’t mean for you to dredge up all that old baggage,” she said quietly, leaning forward to grip his forearm.

Harry looked over and smiled at her, a smile that didn’t quite reach his bright green eyes.

"It's ok, love, I know you didn't mean anything. Sometimes it can't be helped. A word or a sight, even a smell brings up some unwanted memory."

"A smell, Harry?"

"Yeah, like the time that Aunt Petunia was dying some old clothes of Dudley's gray for me to wear to secondary school before I got my letter. It smelled awful. Sometimes if I get a whiff of something damp or moldy it reminds me of that," he said with a shudder.

"But in general, you'd say you're glad that you found out about being a wizard?" Ginny asked trying to steer the conversation back to the positive.

"I'd have to say so. I mean there were some pretty bad times there but it also meant there was you, and your family, our family, all the wonderful people and my being able to do things for them so yes, it certainly is way better then where I thought I would wind up before Hagrid found me," he said with a smile.

With the matter of the destroyed paintings having been resolved life fell into a bit of a routine for Harry and Ginny. During the week Harry was at work dealing with day to day issues as well as the ongoing matters that were precipitated by the smuggler conspiracy. Milligan was given the lead on their involvement in the effort to connect the different magical law enforcement agencies around Europe and Maxwell was working with Muntab to start the training of the Auror hopefuls. At night he and Ginny continued their separate projects, he his course and she her journal, as well as working on the design of the house.

On the weekends Harry would spend a good part of Saturday working up at Hogwarts on his course and Ginny would often go with him to visit with Abigail, primarily to work on the house design, but also to see how she was doing.

This routine was interrupted, happily for a change, by the arrival of an elegantly addressed envelope via a Hogwarts owl. Kreacher delivered it to Harry and Ginny while they were sitting in the study.

"This just arrived by owl, Master Harry, Mistress Ginny," Kreacher said as he offered it.

Ginny took it and said,

"Thanks, Kreacher," then she looked at the front and turned to Harry. "It's addressed to both of us but it's from Hogwarts. Maybe you should open it, Harry."

"Go ahead, Ginny, it's alright."

She shrugged a very Harry like shrug and carefully pulled open the heavy parchment envelope. Inside was a folded piece of parchment with scalloped edges and very elegant calligraphy. She read it aloud.

"The Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is pleased to extend an invitation to Mr. and Mrs. Harry James Potter to be her special guests at the upcoming Halloween Ball to held in the Great Hall commencing at seven o'clock on the evening of 31 Oct. Dress is formal robes. RSVP requested," she concluded and looked over at Harry.

"Wow, Harry, that was kind of formal of Professor McGonagall, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it was, I wonder what she's up to. She's had any number of chances to invite us when we were up there."

"Spoken like a true policeman, Harry. Why does she have to be 'up' to something? Maybe it's just a sign of how much respect they have for you," Ginny said with a bit of exasperation in her voice.

"I dunno, Gin. She's been after me to commit to teaching full time. She even offered me the spot of Transfiguration Professor. I think she's trying to nudge me a bit."

"You didn't tell me that, Harry. That's quite a compliment to ask you to follow in her footsteps. What did you tell her?" Ginny asked.

"I told her I needed to concentrate on getting ready for next year and she let it go at that. Why do you ask?" Harry replied.

"Oh, nothing really," she said noncommittally.

"Come on, Ginny. Out with it, no secrets, remember?"

"Well, it's no secret that that your job to date has been pretty tough on you. I'm not so sure I wouldn't rather be the wife of an esteemed Professor than the Chief of Magical Law Enforcement," she said seriously.

"You know the reasoning behind that, Gin. Do you know how hard that would be on our kids?"

"Any harder than us having to deal with the likes of Snape, or Lockhart, or that absolutely detestable Umbridge person? Or any tougher than their father working what has turned out to be a rather dangerous job? Quite frankly I think you're being rather selfish about that whole thing," Ginny said.

"Selfish? How could you possibly think that, Ginny? You know how much I love the idea of teaching, but I'm staying away from it so our kids will have a chance at a normal school experience," Harry said with a bit of heat.

"Harry, you know as well as I do, much better in fact, that the magical community is desperate for leadership to take us in a new, better direction. The Minister is doing what he can but what we went through with Abigail just shows how much of the old thinking is out there. The only way it is going to really change is to teach it to the children. You could do that better than anyone, Harry. With your words in a classroom and just by being there, being you. Don't you think Professor McGonagall realizes that, or Bill, or any of the rest of them? Not to mention the fact that we are at least a dozen years away from having our first child attend. Think of all the good you could accomplish in that time," Ginny concluded.

Harry sat back in his chair, a bit overwhelmed by the vehemence of Ginny's argument. The idea was tempting but his thoughts came back to his job and what was going on with the Ministry.

"What about my job, Ginny? What about everything that we've been trying to accomplish there?"

"What about it? You've instituted the changes you and the Minister wanted and they are running well, aren't they? You'd have the year of sabbatical to test to see if they can go on without you there. Hermione is handling nearly all of the matters dealing with the magical races now. She'd still have your backing. It's not like you couldn't pop back and forth to talk to this group or that. You'd still be able to do lectures and speak at conferences. I'm not asking you to decide right now, sweetheart. I'm just asking that you not push something off for twenty or twenty five years because you think you'd be making it difficult on our children. I don't think it would be all that bad."

"Ok, I'll give it some thought. But back to this," he said after a moment, pointing to the invitation. "I assume you'd like to go."

"Too right I do. We haven't had a chance to dance in ages and since your knee seems to be behaving itself we should be able to do lots," Ginny said with a grin.

"Formal attire, though. I guess my good black robe should be adequate but I think you'd like something new, eh?"

"New for both of us, Harry. If Professor McGonagall went to the trouble to do this," she said waving the parchment meaningfully, "I think we owe it to her to turn out in our best."

"Not to mention the fact that it gives you a reason to go shopping?"

Ginny didn't answer but the look on her face spoke volumes. An RSVP card was included so Ginny signified that they would be attending and called for Kreacher and asked if he would use Harry's owl to send the reply. They spent the rest of the evening quietly at their work, although Harry accomplished little. His thoughts kept

returning to what Ginny said. What were his reasons for resisting the allure of the job he truly loved to do and which would be of greater benefit to the community he felt he owed so much?

Early the following Saturday, before they took their trip to Hogwarts, Ginny and Harry paid a visit to the shop in Diagon Alley that sold robes. The same older witch was there and greeted them as they entered.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Potter. How can I be of service today?” she asked.

“We need some new formal robes, Madam Malkin. We’re going to the Halloween Ball up at Hogsmeade,” Ginny replied.

“I’d assume that for the gentleman we’d be looking at basic black, perhaps with some small embellishments?”

“Very small,” Harry said.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you sit down and let me handle this,” Ginny said in a tone of voice familiar to husbands since the dawn of time.

Harry shrugged his usual shrug and found a chair and sat down. He watched as Ginny and Madam Malkin combed through several racks of wizard’s robes with many whispered comments and occasional glances back at Harry. He simply nodded and smiled back. A robe was taken down from a rack and the two witches examined it thoroughly. Ginny finally turned around and called Harry over.

“Take a look at this one, sweetheart.”

Harry stood up and walked over. The robe Ginny was holding up was black, with piping in raised black stitching around the hem, the cuffs and collar. This piping was bordered with silver thread and the loop and button closure used silver buttons with a loop of black cord highlighted by silver thread. The lining was a shimmering black satin.

“Looks nice,” he said.

Ginny rolled her eyes and said,

“Just try it on, Harry, and let’s see how it looks.”

Harry obliged and let the two witches look him up and down. Then Ginny directed him to the mirror so he could see for himself. He had to admit it looked very good on him, although his unruly hair and large round glasses did seem to detract from the overall dignity of the outfit. But he nodded and said as he turned around,

“I like it. If you think it’s the right one, we’ll take it, Gin.”

“Ok, Madam Malkin, we’ll take that one for Harry. I guess while he’s being fitted I’ll look around a bit for myself.”

Madam Malkin insisted on doing the fitting herself. The famous Harry Potter shouldn’t be attended to by mere assistants she said. Harry had a few thoughts about the idea of ‘mere’ but kept them to himself. So as she pinned and tucked Ginny worked her way through the more extensive racks of witches robes. By the time Harry had been attended to and reinstated to the ‘waiting’ chair Ginny had several selections. One was a medium blue with dark blue accenting similar to Harry’s but without the silver. The second was a dark blue with embroidered patterns in the same color to produce a subtle raised effect. The last was a dark brown, devoid of any embellishment.

“What do you think, Harry?” she asked, as she held them up.

“It would help to see you in them but I’m not sure of the brown one. I think it would make you look like a muggle monk.”

“A what?”

“A monk, a priest, holy man, that sort of thing,” he explained.

“Oh, ok, well, I’ll try on the others then.”

With Madam Malkin’s help she tried on first the lighter blue and then the darker one. She modeled each for Harry and as far as he was concerned it was no contest. The dark blue with the embroidered accenting looked much better on her and he said so.

"I was thinking the same thing, Harry. Ok, I'll go with this one."

Harry sat back as Madam Malkin took Ginny in hand and repeated the fitting process. When the fussy older witch was satisfied she sent Harry and Ginny on their way with promises that the robes would be ready for pick-up the following Monday. They made a stop at Angelina's to pick up a couple of dozen of the butter cookies that Harry had come to love so much. He wanted to leave some with Abigail.

"Hey, you two," Angelina said as they came through the door.

It was still early enough that the only customers were there for baked goods and not ice cream. Harry was glad that the new venture was working out for his 'sister' both for her sake and for his own selfish reasons.

"Hello, sister of mine," Harry said with a slight grin. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, Harry. As you can see business is pretty good. How are you guys doing? I mean with the painting thing."

"Abigail is doing pretty well. Her school work hasn't suffered and she's sticking with her artwork but she's lost a bit of her sparkle, I'd guess you say. What is it they call it, sadder but wiser," Harry replied. "That's kind of why we're here. We're going up to Hogwarts and we'll be seeing her so I thought we'd take some of those butter cookies along. She really likes those."

"Not that you wouldn't mind having a few yourself, huh Harry?" Ginny asked, her face a mask of innocence.

Harry took his place in line at the bakery counter where one of Angelina's assistants was waiting on the witch directly in front of him. When the young witch looked up and saw Harry standing there, her eyes went wide. Harry just nodded and smiled back. Angelina noticed the exchange and moved behind the counter to wait on Harry herself.

“So, Mr. Potter, what will it be? Like I didn’t already know,” she said with a smirk.

“Two dozen of the butter cookies, please,” he replied with a straight face.

Angelina took out a flattened box, popped it into shape and began placing the cookies inside. The witch who had been in front of him buying bread completed her purchases and made her way out of the shop. The assistant now stood to one side and tried not to make it look like she was watching Harry which made it all the more obvious that she was. Harry could hear Ginny mumble something under her breath but he didn’t let it show. When Angelina was finished she brought the cookies out from behind the counter where Harry paid her. Both he and Ginny received hugs from Angelina with promises to meet soon for dinner at the Cauldron. As they left the shop with last waves Ginny said,

“Geez, you’d think with your wife standing right there with you that they wouldn’t ogle you like that.”

“Ogle? Who was ogling?” Harry asked with a bit of a laugh.

“That girl behind the counter. Please, Harry, don’t tell me you didn’t see the way she was looking at you.”

“Ginny, calm down. She was just surprised to see me. I didn’t recognize her so she must be someone new. Any of the others that Angelina has hired had the same reaction the first time they saw me,” Harry said, trying to suppress a smile at his wife’s outrage.

“Well, they just better behave themselves, especially when I’m around, that’s all I’m saying,” Ginny said with a snort.

“Yes, I would hope so. I’d hate to have to bring my own wife in on charges for roughing up a shop assistant,” he replied deadpan.

Ginny looked up at him in shock, then narrowed her eyes and finally began to laugh. She took Harry’s arm in hers as they moved up the alley to a spot where they could Disapparate up to Hogwarts. When

they arrived they first made their way to Hagrid's hut since Abigail was usually to be found there when she had free time. Today was no different. She was standing in front of the corral where the Hippogriffs were often kept and it looked like she was working her magic on Buckbeak, who was standing stock still while Abigail's pencil flashed across the page of her sketch book. Norbie was laying in the grass not far away. He looked up as the pair approached but only wagged his tail but made no move to meet them.

As was usually the case when she was working she gave no indication that she was aware that anyone was nearby so Harry and Ginny quietly moved past to the front of Hagrid's hut. Hagrid was sitting on the bench in front, working on what looked like a piece of leather riding gear.

"Hullo, Harry, Ginny, good ta see yas again," Hagrid said with a smile.

"Hiya Hagrid. How's our girl doing?" Harry asked by way of reply.

"Seems ta be holdin' her own. Smilin' a bit more than before but still kinda quiet like. Summat interestin' bin happenin' lately though. A coupla times this past week I seen her standin' near ta the edge of the forest. Looks like she's talkin' to someone. I think mebbe a younger Centaur or two have been comin' ta the edge and she's been talkin' with 'em."

"You don't think that will be a problem do you, Hagrid?" Ginny asked. "Might the young ones get in trouble that way?"

"I dunno, but I don't think so, Ginny. The elders know about our Abigail. If'n anything they'd jest be told ta stay clear of the edge," Hagrid said reassuringly. "Fer all I know she's probably askin' fer 'em ta pose fer her."

This got smiles all around. Harry was about to add something when they heard a little shout and turned to see Abigail hurrying over to meet them. She laid her sketch pad and pencils on the bench next to Hagrid and caught Harry up in a tight hug around the waist. It felt to Harry like she was trying to squeeze the breath out of him. Then she let go and since she was much closer in height to Ginny threw her

arms around her neck and held on just as tightly. Ginny looked at Harry with a questioning glance but he could only shake his head to indicate he had no idea what was going on.

When Abigail finally released her hold on Ginny she stepped back and they could see the tears in her eyes. Harry went down to one knee so he could look her more eye-to-eye.

“What’s going on, little one? Is something wrong?”

“No, not really, Harry. It’s just that I was sitting here on the bench the other day, thinking, and it occurred to me I was being just as silly as I thought I was before everything happened with the painting. Yes, all my hard work was destroyed, but a bunch of people did get to see it and what it was supposed to say. And I saw a side of life that wasn’t so great and changed the way I could see the world but so what. Was that a reason to just go moping around like some moody artist? I mean, really, how many times has that been done? And look at you. Look at all the things you’ve seen and done and had to live through and yet you’re always right there doing what needs to be done and you smile so much and give to us so much. You’re a perfect example of how to get on with life no matter how hard you get knocked around. So I’m just glad to see you today and happy to be able to spend time with you and say thank you again for all you’ve done for me, both of you.”

She then wrapped her arms around Harry’s neck and hugged him perhaps not so desperately but with as much feeling. Harry looked up at Ginny and saw her misty eyed and smiling and she mouthed the words,

“I think she’s going to be ok.”

Harry nodded and when he looked over toward Hagrid he could see his big friend looking away so as not to be embarrassed by his own emotions. When Abigail let go and stepped back she gave Harry one of her impish grins, that he had not seen since he had to break the news about the painting to her, and said,

“So, what did you bring me?”

Harry couldn't help but start laughing and he pulled out the box of cookies and handed it to her. She looked at it all wide eyed and said,

"Are these what I think they are?"

"If you're thinking they are the most wonderful, fabulous cookies ever made, then yes that's what they are," Harry said with a smile.

Abigail squealed and took hold of the box and opened the top. She took out one cookie and bit it in half and her eyes closed as she savored the sweet, buttery taste. Quickly she popped the rest in her mouth and then took one and handed it to Harry, a second to Ginny and a third to Hagrid, who had to simply hold out his opened hand so she could place it on the huge palm. About this time Norbie strolled up and she took a last cookie and offered it to him. It disappeared with a quick move of his big tongue and then he slurped her hand to get the last bit of flavor that might have remained. The others ate theirs and Hagrid especially made a fuss over them. For someone who thought his rock cakes were an enjoyable treat the cookie was a revelation. Harry promised he would have some sent up when he got back. Saying their goodbyes for the time being to Hagrid and Norbie the family of three began the walk up to the castle. Harry was in the best mood he had been in for some time and it seemed to be felt by this wife and ward. Little comments sent them to laughing and on one occasion the two young ladies attacked him in a manner reminiscent of that morning in their bedroom at the Burrow.

As they walked up to the front door of the school they happened to meet Professor McGonagall coming out. She noticed the byplay between the three and smiled.

"Well, we do seem to be in a good mood this morning. Might I be able to share, Merlin knows I could use a dose," she said.

"It's a combination of Abigail overcoming her melancholy and a taste of some truly amazing baking from Angelina's shop. What's the problem, Professor?" Harry replied.

"I'll pass on the cookie, although I think I know the ones you're referring to. As to my problem, we have the first Quidditch match of the season beginning in less than an hour and Madame Hooch has come down ill. Madame Pomfrey has assured me it isn't life threatening but it's likely to be some weeks before she'll recover. I need a referee for today and a flying instructor until she's back on her feet."

Before Harry could say anything he heard Ginny say,

"Get me a broom and a robe and I'll take care of the match today. After that we can talk about the rest of it," she said firmly.

When she saw Harry looking at her she said,

"Harry, you're not the only one who can step up in an emergency. Besides, I've hardly flown at all since the camp and I've been getting a little restless."

"Come with me, young lady and we'll get you set up and I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate this. Harry, I'll see you after I get this taken care of."

"Yes, Ma'am, I'll be inside. See you later, Ginny. Have a good match," he offered.

"Thanks, sweetheart, see you later," Ginny said as she kissed his cheek and hurried off with the Head.

Harry watched them go and had to shake his head. He was about to offer to be the referee and he was a bit disappointed that his wife beat him to the punch. He shrugged and laughed and went inside with Abigail, who had watched the whole thing, but who had said nothing, only smiled a knowing smile. As they stood in the foyer Harry looked down at his ward who was looking back at him in a way that made his heart lighter.

"So, any plans for the day?" he asked.

"I thought I might take a walk into Hogsmeade. I want to visit the stationary shop and couple of other places."

Harry nodded and reached in to his pocket and handed her some sickles. She looked at him and smiled,

"Thanks, Harry, you're the best. And not just because of this," she said motioning with the hand full of silver.

Harry just smiled and winked and watched as she made her way to her dorm room. Harry wondered how long the cookies were going to last. He laughed and went in search of Professor Flitwick, who was first on his list to meet that morning.

It was sometime after lunch when Harry heard the sounds of the returning fans from the Quidditch match. Harry figured the match had lasted somewhere around four to four and a half hours. Not too long by conventional standards but he knew how fatiguing that much flying could be. He had had his meetings with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall and he was now sitting with Bill, who had come from Shell Cottage to talk to him. From the sound of the students it must have been a very exciting match. It wasn't too long before Ginny came walking into the Great Hall. Her hair was somewhat disheveled and her cheeks red from flying in the cool autumn air but she had a very satisfied look on her face.

She came over and stood next to Harry and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. She gave her brother similar treatment.

"So, love, how did the match go? You look like you had a good time," Harry said with a smile.

"It was a lot of fun, Harry. I haven't flown that much in a few months. It was Slytherin versus Hufflepuff and it was pretty rowdy at first. I don't know if it was because of me, or that it was the first match or what but they were playing like street brawlers. I finally had to call a halt to the game and pull both teams in together and dress them down. Most of them got the message but the Slytherin beaters have

more muscle than brains so I had to use my secret weapon,” Ginny said with a smug smile.

“What was that, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“Well, after I gave them the talking to, they roughed up a Hufflepuff chaser and I called a foul. And there they were, sitting on their brooms looking all pleased with themselves so I just casually mentioned that it really annoyed you when people were disrespectful to me and did they know that you happened to be right up in the castle,” she said smiling.

Bill started to laugh and Harry rolled his eyes and said,

“Oh, well thank you very much.”

“You should have seen them,” she said with an evil little smirk. “They went white as a sheet and practically fell off their brooms trying to apologize. They were perfect little gentlemen the rest of the match. The stupid thing is they can play their positions quite well so the rough stuff wasn’t even necessary.”

A number of students had begun filtering into the Hall and the three looked up. As they did so two rather large students in Slytherin flying robes came in and Ginny said,

“Ah, there they are now.”

Harry looked at the two and they looked at him. In less than a heartbeat they pulled up short, their eyes going wide and then they were backpedalling through the crowd of students behind them and finally turning and hurrying back out into the hallway. Ginny was giggling and Bill was laughing uproariously while Harry just shook his head then scowled at his wife.

Ginny gave him another kiss on the cheek and informed Harry that she needed to go up and see the Headmistress about substituting for Madam Hooch. Harry gave her a little smile and watched her walk out of the Hall. When he turned to face Bill he noticed his brother in law was regarding him with a wry smile.

"The old place just keeps pulling at you, doesn't it, Harry."

"I'm not sure if it's this old place or a certain older witch that keeps pulling at me," Harry said, a touch sarcastically. "Do you know that Professor McGonagall offered me the position of Transfiguration Professor after I finish up next year?"

"I didn't know that, Harry, but it doesn't really surprise me. The Head has never made a secret of the fact that she thinks you should be here teaching. And she's not the only one. The discussions usually get pretty animated after you've done one of your special sessions. Speaking of which, will you be doing any this year?" Bill asked hopefully.

"I wasn't sure at first, Bill, but it might not be a bad idea to do that as a test of the new material we've been trying to put together. Maybe even a special session with your first and second years as a sort of a tune up for next year. What do you think?" Harry asked.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Bill said and then he looked at Harry seriously. "You know, Harry, you should see your face when you talk about things for next year. Your whole face lights up."

"Well, I am kind of excited to be coming back, I have to admit," Harry said and then he looked up at the ceiling watching the image of the clouds floating by. "I'll be honest with you, Bill. It's difficult sometimes to not just chuck that whole Ministry thing and come back here. All that time I was recuperating after the fight with the dragon, I kept thinking about it. But what I'm doing there is so important to the future of our community. How could I be so selfish as to give that up?"

Bill looked at Harry and shook his head.

"I know that the healers have said that your mind works in different ways these days, but after hearing what you just said I can't help but wonder about what goes on behind those glasses of yours. Nothing you've ever done in your whole life has been selfish. If you were to come teach here, no matter how much you'd love it, you wouldn't be selfish. You have so much to share with these young witches and

wizards you'd be giving of yourself every day. I'm not here to tell you what to do, Harry, but try not to just dismiss the whole idea out of hand."

Harry looked away again and thought how what Bill said sounded so much like what he and Ginny talked about a few days before. If he was given to paranoia he might think that they were working together but maybe it was just that they saw something that was so obvious to anyone but him. He laughed a bit and looked back at Bill.

"Ginny thinks I'm being selfish because I said I wouldn't teach until after our kids graduated and I'd be denying the world my services for all those years," he said then laughed again.

"Don't laugh, Harry. My little sis is a lot smarter then she lets on and she doesn't miss much. If you haven't already figured that out. You could do a lot worse than to let her give you advice," Bill said seriously.

It was perhaps an hour later when Ginny returned to the Hall, having returned the borrowed flying robes and other referees gear. She came over to sit by Harry and Bill and then they looked to her expectantly.

"Harry, unless you have any objections I'll be the stand-in flying instructor and Quidditch referee for at least the next six weeks. Madame Pomfrey figures it will be that long before Madame Hooch is fully recovered. I had a chance to talk to her for a bit up in the hospital wing. Poor dear is so weak right now. It's funny, with her being so feisty and all, she seemed a lot younger then she really is. Did you know that she was Mum and Dad's flying instructor?"

"I knew that," Bill said. "I remember them talking about it when I first came up. Did they say what the problem was?"

"No, and I thought it was impolite to ask. Whatever it is it hit her pretty hard. But she was very gracious and thought I would do a great job of it. She said my joining the Harpies was one of her proudest moments as a teacher. Turns out it's her favorite team," Ginny said with pride.

"I'm sure you'll do great to, love. I'm sure the kids will love having you out there. Just try not to swing me around as a club too often, ok," Harry said seriously.

Ginny laughed and poked him in the ribs but not too hard. They left Bill soon after and Disapparated home. They enjoyed a fine dinner and retired to the study. Ginny found a comfortable spot on Harry's lap and the two cuddled together in the big, well cushioned chair. Harry broke the warm silence after a while.

"You know it's funny that you were the one that was so intent on me becoming a teacher and you're the one who got the job," he said with a laugh.

"Don't laugh, Harry. I was serious the other day."

"I know you were, Gin. Bill said the same sorts of things to me this afternoon," Harry replied.

"Of course he would. We Weasleys are very intelligent and intuitive people," Ginny said in a slightly mocking, haughty tone.

The house rang to the sounds of Ginny's screams and laughter as Harry decided not argue but instead played the dirty trick of tickling her.

On Monday morning Harry was sitting in his office with Tom, going through the reports from last week. The one thing Harry never counted on was all the paper work. At one point he looked up at the family photograph and smiled a bit at all the faces looking back at him, including Abigail who was back in her spot directly behind him. After Harry skimmed and then initialed the last report he pushed the stack back across at Tom and leaned back in his chair.

"Anything else, Tom?" Harry asked.

"Just this travel request for Mr. Milligan for Paris for next week. The working group meeting, you know," Tom replied.

"Yes, I remember. Let's have it," Harry said, holding out his hand.

He read through the parchment and then signed his approval. He handed the sheet back across the desk and looked at his assistant. He noticed a strange look on his face.

"Is there something you wanted to say, Tom?"

After a moment's hesitation he spoke,

"I was just curious if you were up to Hogwarts this weekend, sir. And if you'd seen Ms. Westwood. A number of the staff has been asking after her. Some of us have sent notes but we haven't heard back."

"I think you'll see some answers shortly, Tom. She's had something of a breakthrough this past week and she was in much better spirits when we saw her on Saturday," Harry said with a small smile.

"Ah, that's wonderful to hear. I'll be sure to pass that on to the others," Tom said.

"Yes, I'd appreciate it. I'd forgotten that the others might be concerned," Harry said.

Tom nodded once and left the office. Harry got up and left the office himself, heading for Hermione's oversized closet. As usual the door was closed and Harry knocked. When he announced himself he heard the footsteps and waited a moment for the door to swing open.

"Harry, come in, please. Have you anything new about Abigail?" she asked.

"Yes, she's doing much better. She's coming to understand that people aren't always what they seem but that's not a reason to shut everyone out and live an unhappy life. She's even showing signs of her sense of humor again," Harry said.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Harry," Hermione said reaching out to grip his forearm. "So what do I owe the honor of your august presence?"

“August? Don’t you think that’s taking things a bit far?” Harry said with a laugh as they both sat down.

“Just teasing you, so what’s up?”

“You know that I’m preparing for a year's sabbatical up at Hogwarts and I was hoping that you might be able to offer me some help,” Harry said earnestly.

“Help you with teaching, Harry? Good grief, you’re the most natural teacher I think I’ve ever seen, what possible help could you need from me?” Hermione said.

“Well, I think you’re exaggerating more than just a bit, but I need your expertise in organizing and scheduling. I’m going to be juggling two different courses plus working with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall as an occasional guest in their classes. I’m going to need help getting and keeping it all straight.”

“Hmm, I see what you mean, Harry. That could get to be a bit confusing. Sure, you know I’d be happy to help,” she said and then smiled an odd smile. “You, my dear fellow, never do things half way do you?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I’m sure that when Director Grimsson suggested that you take a sabbatical to teach at Hogwarts he was envisioning an extension of what you’ve done with your lectures. But here you are juggling two major courses and a couple of minor efforts.”

“That’s true, Hermione, but the new course is only for fifth through seventh years, and I only have the first years for DADA, although Bill and I have talked about doing second years as well, so that isn’t even a full course. The other classes will only be now and again.”

“I understand that, Harry,” Hermione said, “but when you consider you’ll be switching back and forth amongst several topics, that makes it harder. But anyway, why don’t we get together one night this week and start sketching out a system for you.”

"Your place or here in London?" Harry asked.

"Here, I think. Your house is roomier and I'd like to have Ron along. We don't get together as much as we should," she said.

"Too true, we've all gotten so busy so soon," Harry replied.

Hermione nodded and then looked at Harry with a tilt of her head and said,

"I understand that Professor McGonagall offered you the opportunity to take over the Transfiguration class after your sabbatical."

"How did you find that out? I only mentioned that to Bill on Saturday," Harry said incredulously.

"Weasley telegraph. I'm sure that Bill told Fleur who passed it on to Mum Weasley and then out it went. Ron told me last night when he got home. I probably shouldn't tell you this but your non committal response didn't go over well."

"For crying out loud, Hermione," Harry said with some heat. "Why is this becoming such a big deal all of a sudden?"

"First of all, it's not so sudden. You know as well as I do that some members of the family were never all that thrilled with your taking on your current job. As for the rest, your taking the sabbatical has just made it visible that's all. Try not to get so excited about it, Harry."

"Hmmm, I try, but sometimes having so many people trying to nudge me gets a little annoying," he said.

"Well, remember they have your best interests at heart, Harry, even if they do get a little pushy about it. So how does Wednesday evening sound? Do you think Kreacher can handle four for dinner?"

"He'll be ecstatic. The only time he mumbles anymore is when he thinks it's time for us to have guests for dinner and we go too long

without. I think he likes to show off his cooking skills,” Harry said with a smile.

Harry left a few moments later, glad for Hermione’s help but disturbed at the thought that he was up against the whole clan about this teaching business. He took a deep breath and let it out. Then a thought occurred to him and he detoured away from this office and headed down to the corridor outside the Wizengamot Chamber to see if his friend and mentor was available.

He was disappointed to see he was not. Perhaps he was having a conversation with Professor McGonagall. As he stood there a familiar voice called to him.

“Young man, Mr. Potter, if you would,” called the portrait of the older witch with whom he had talked before.

Harry moved sideways a bit so he could see her.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I believe if you wait, the Professor will be returning shortly,” the witch said.

“Thank you, Ma’am, I’ll do that. How have you been, if I may ask?” Harry said politely, remembering that she put great store in courtesy.

“As well as an old painting hanging on a wall in a damp corridor for two centuries can hope,” she replied with a small smile.

“Harry, is that you, my boy?” a voice called out from beyond the side of the empty portrait.

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“If you would wait just a bit, I’ll be there momentarily,” Professor Dumbledore.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied.

The witch nodded knowingly and then said,

"I understand that the trial of that detestable creature that destroyed those fine paintings went well, yes?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, he admitted to the crimes, claiming he was making a statement in support of the old ways. He got treble damages and a year in Azkaban," Harry informed her.

"Hmmm, well I can't say I agree entirely with the direction the Minister is taken us, but then again, I'm from a completely different day and age, but I most surely do not take the idea of destroying paintings lightly for reasons I'm sure you can appreciate," she said with a wry tone.

"Yes, ma'am, I can imagine it hits very close to home."

For the first time, he heard the old witch chuckle. At that time the image of Professor Dumbledore walked into view. He smiled at Harry and said,

"So good to see you, my boy. How may I be of service?" the old wizard asked.

"As usual, I'm in need of some advice, sir," Harry said as he moved a bit closer to the Professor's portrait.

"I will try and be of help if I can, of course, Harry. What is the nature of the advice you seek?"

"I'm pretty sure you know about my going up to teach at Hogwarts next year. It will be the first sabbatical that Director Grimsson thought would be a good idea. Well, sir, now I'm starting to get pressure from my family to make a permanent change. Ginny was pretty forceful in what she thought I should be doing. Apparently, she's never been completely comfortable being a policeman's wife, even if I do mostly administrative duties these days. Professor McGonagall even offered me the post of Transfiguration Professor. It's getting very confusing. I don't know why they are behaving this way," Harry said.

The smile was gone from Dumbledore's face. It was now wearing an expression of concern and a bit of sympathy.

"I am, of course, intimately familiar with the Headmistress' desire for you to be on the faculty, Harry. We've discussed it any number of times and yes, I'm aware she offered you the transfiguration post and I agree with her that you would do a magnificent job at it. When the details of your efforts with Dumbledore's Army became known we suspected that, among your many talents, you were a natural and very gifted teacher. The results of your term as Professor Weasley's assistant proved it beyond a doubt. So that explains the Head's attitude," Dumbledore said with a brief flash of a smile, but that faded as he continued.

"As to your family, Harry, I don't think there is any real difficulty in understanding that they are quietly and desperately terrified for your future."

"Excuse me, sir? I mean, I know I've had some hard knocks but I think I'm in good shape now, even my knee hasn't caused me any problems in a long while. I still occasionally stop in to see Dr. Parsons and I think my temper is under control. Why should they be so afraid for me?" Harry said, somewhat alarmed.

"Harry, you suffer the disadvantage of seeing your life from the inside. It can be a much different picture than what those who see it from the outside observe. The Weasleys have developed a fiercely protective attitude towards you, my boy."

"Don't I know it," Harry said.

"No, Harry, I don't think you do, not fully at any rate," Dumbledore countered. "When word got out that your parents had been killed and you were now 'the boy who lived' many families contacted me with the offer to take you in. You are aware of why that could not happen. Molly and Arthur Weasley were two of the most vehement. The Potters and the Weasleys, both of so called pure blood backgrounds, were known to each other for years before you were born, Harry. Your meeting with Ronald Weasley on the Hogwart's Express was not truly the first time you met. You were together as infants several

times. The Weasleys' concern for your well being began almost from the moment of your birth, Harry, and has only grown stronger with the years. I was often the recipient of messages from Molly asking about how you were getting on while I was Headmaster. Now, after all you endured and accomplished as a student, you now place yourself at the front line so to speak, dedicated to protecting all those around you from a reoccurrence of the horrors you yourself have endured. From your family's point of view, it has nearly cost you your life once, and put you in the midst of mortal confrontations, what, three times and you've been at the job only a few short years. They must be wondering how long your luck can hold out."

Harry stood looking down at his feet. He wondered if this was how it was for everyone, your choices limited and constrained by obligations to others. He looked back up to Dumbledore and said in a quiet voice,

"What should I do, sir?"

"Ah, alas, Harry, that is not something I can tell you. I can only suggest that you give it careful consideration and let your instincts guide you. Trust in yourself to make the right decision," the Professor said, his voice full of empathy.

"Young man, if I may?" the voice of the usually stern witch called to him, uncharacteristically soft.

"Yes, ma'am, please."

"You are conflicted because your desire to follow in your mentors footsteps clashes with your sense of duty that you believe constrains you to remain at your post here at the Ministry, yes?" she asked.

"I guess you could say that, ma'am."

"Allow me to offer this one observation. A witch or wizard who attempts to accomplish great things that they think they should be doing while inwardly desiring to be doing something else will ultimately fail at both. They will fail at the first because they will be distracted by the second and great things require great focus. And they will fail at the second because they never have the chance to do

those things because of the first. Perhaps that is something to think on," she said, her stern visage softened by sympathetic eyes.

Harry looked at her and nodded, returning a tight, half smile.

"Thank you, ma'am."

He turned to face the Professor who was regarding him intently.

"Let me say this by way of closing, Harry, for I think we have talked enough and you need time to consider. I have made a pledge not to try and influence you in this matter. However, I will say, that if you do decide to make a career change in this direction, I believe whole heartedly that you will be very successful and the impact on the future generations will be as significant as anything you have or will do in your present career, if not more so. Now I suggest you take some time to consider the matter. I hope this has been helpful, my boy."

"Yes, sir, it has and thank you, and to you too, ma'am," he replied.

"It has been a privilege, young man," she replied.

As Harry turned and began walking back up the corridor, he heard the beginnings of a whispered conversation. He knew the best way to think about all of this was not to think about it at all. He understood that his subconscious mind seemed to do a better job of sorting through all the details of an issue and when it was satisfied that a resolution had been arrived at it would bubble it up to his conscious mind. So he went back to work. He hunted down Milligan to make sure he was satisfied with the plan proposals that his chief investigator would carry with him to Paris. Then he found Muntab and discussed the status of the training plan for the Auror hopefuls. He was glad to see that she was making use of the offered assistance of the Testing division to assure the Patrollers would be trained up to a proper level. Next came Maxwell and the two spent the remainder of the day working on the transition plan since Maxwell would be acting chief while Harry was at Hogwarts, although it was agreed that Harry could be summoned in the event of anything extraordinary.

And so it went until the thirty first of October and the Halloween Ball at Hogwarts. Ginny spent a fair amount of time desperately trying to get Harry's hair to behave. She was nearly ready to bring her wand to bear when Harry reminded her of the theory that the Healer at Beauxbaton came up with about Harry's innate defensive magic gifted to him by his dying mother. Trying to wrestle his hair into submission with magic might be construed as an attempt to alter him and she might suffer from the backlash. She settled for using some muggle hair gel but the effect was less than satisfactory so she sent him to wash it out and she would just have to resign herself to her husband's idiosyncratic appearance.

She on the other hand was groomed to perfection and Harry stood in silent admiration as she made a final check in the corridor mirror. She turned and looked at Harry with her eyebrows raised, inviting his assessment.

"Gorgeous as always, my love. How I ever attracted your attention I'll never know," he said, only half in jest.

"One of the great mysteries, that's for certain," she said, her face serious, then breaking into an impish grin as she saw the look on Harry's face. "It was fate, Harry. How else could I have known so early. But enough of that. Tonight is a night for fun and dancing and we can set aside all the serious matters for an evening, can't we?"

"Yes, I think that is an excellent idea, my dear. Shall we?" he said as he offered his arm to his wife.

They left through the front door held open by Kreacher who bowed them out with wishes for a pleasant evening. Once on the porch they Disapparated to Harry's usual spot outside the memorial park. It was a cool, mildly breezy evening.

"Hmm, perhaps we should have worn cloaks, Harry," Ginny said as they began walking toward the school gates.

"Maybe, but we'll be up there quickly and the warmth of the Hall will feel that much better."

They stepped along and soon they were at the front door and Harry swung it open and gestured for Ginny to precede him inside.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. You are a true gentleman,” she said with a glint in her eye.

“It is my pleasure to be of service to so beautiful a lady, Mrs. Potter,” he replied with aplomb.

Ginny giggled a bit and once they were inside she took his arm and together they joined a small swarm of students flowing toward the entrance. There were a number of welcomes and greetings offered to them both. With Ginny filling in for Madam Hooch she was getting more well known among the general student population.

The Great Hall was arranged much as it had the first time the Halloween Ball was held, when Harry and Ginny were both seventh years. Many round tables were arranged about the central open expanse of dance floor with a few similar tables placed on the dais for the faculty and staff.

As Harry and Ginny moved across the dance floor a familiar silver haired figure hurried to meet them. Despite being a recent mother, Fleur looked stunning in a pale lavender robe that looked more like a gown. Her hair shimmered and her smile was broad and bright.

“Harry, Ginny, it is wonderful to see you. You both look magnifique. These are new robes, yes?” she said as she swept Harry up in a hug which he returned with equal joy.

Ginny was next and the two ‘sisters’ held to each other tightly. Whispered words were spoken back and forth and then they turned their attention to Harry. Fleur’s eyes narrowed a touch and she tilted her head to one side pursing her lips.

“I do not know, Ginny. A ‘perhaps’ but I think in the end it will just be what it will be,” she said.

Ginny blew out a long breath and shrugged a bit and then hooked Harry’s right arm while Fleur took hold of his left and they escorted

him up to a table on the dais that was already occupied by Bill. He stood up to greet Harry with a handshake and his little sister with a hug. They all sat down and looked around and then Harry looked at his brother in law.

"I'm kind of curious, Bill. Do you have any idea why Ginny and I got such an elaborate invitation for tonight? I'd have thought that the Head could have just asked me any of the times I was up here," Harry said.

"My guess is it has to do with your upcoming assignment, Harry. I think she's looking to make some sort of announcement about it tonight and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she's not trying to coax you a bit," Bill said with a small smile on his scarred face.

Harry just shook his head and avoided looking at either Ginny or Fleur. They watched as the students continued to file in and in a few moments more of the faculty arrived and there were many greetings exchanged around the table. Once it looked like the Hall had filled Professor McGonagall approached the podium and rapped on it with a gavel to get everyone's attention.

"Good evening everyone and welcome to the Halloween Ball. I hope you all have a very enjoyable evening. Before we begin the festivities I have an announcement I'd like to make. I am most pleased to be able to inform you that next year, Mr. Harry Potter will be returning to us to teach full time for the entire year."

The Professor was obliged to bang the gavel again to get the Hall back in order because of the outbreak of applause. Harry was doing his best to maintain his composure and he could feel squeezes on his arms from both sides. The Headmistress resumed her comments.

"Mr., or perhaps I should say, Professor Potter will be teaching a new course he has titled Applied Magic and it will be an elective available to fifth through seventh years. He will also teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts first and second years. In addition, Professor Flitwick and I will be inviting Professor Potter to participate in some of our classes as well. For those of you interested in the elective course please see your head of house for a copy of a brief synopsis so you

may discuss it as part of your career plans. Now, enjoy your evening,” she said and then gestured for the music to begin.

As the strains of a stately dance piece began Harry stood and offered his arm to his wife and they moved down to the dance floor followed by Bill and Fleur. As they began to move together on the floor Ginny looked up into Harry’s green eyes, looking for a sense of what he was feeling. His look in response gave no clue so she said,

“The students seemed rather happy to have you coming back, Harry.”

He nodded and said,

“Yes, we did seem to get along whenever I was up here. They really are a good lot. Speaking of students did you happen to see Abigail? I wasn’t looking around too much,” Harry said.

“Yes, I noticed and yes I saw her, she was back near the far wall with some of her Ravenclaw friends and stop trying to change the subject,” she said firmly.

“Yes, dear, I know they would be happy to have me around the old place and yes, I admit I’d be happy to be here, but I’m not ready to make that choice,” he said just as firmly.

“I understand that, my love, just so long as you acknowledge what you see,” she said and let it drop.

Harry and Ginny completed the dance and then remained on the floor for a livelier tune that didn’t leave much opportunity for further conversation. When it was done he was taken firmly in hand by Fleur and they danced to another slower tune. As they danced, her blue eyes firmly held his green as if she was trying to read what was going on behind them. Finally she spoke.

“Bill tells me that you ‘ave been offered a teaching post after next year, yes?”

“Yes, that’s right. As Transfiguration Professor.”

"I beleeve that both Geeny and Bill 'ave talked to you about eet?" she continued.

"Yes, they have. And I guess now it's your turn," Harry replied.

"arry, I 'ave never 'idden from you thee fact that I 'ate that you do what you do. But eet ees not for me to make decisions for you. I weell only say thees. Whatever you do, do what your 'eart tells you to do. Then you weell not go wrong. You are wise beyond your years, I trust you weell choose wisely," and as if to finish the statement she leaned forward and kissed him on both cheeks and smiled at him.

When the dance came to an end he pulled her close and hugged her and he whispered a simple 'thank you' into her ear. When he stepped back he could see the shine in her eyes. He smiled and then began to walk her back to the dais but was intercepted by a number of students that were simultaneously offering their congratulations on his pending return and trying to winnow some details about the course from him. He spoke for a few moments with them and then Fleur interrupted and with a dazzling smile subdued the students and informed them that the 'Professor' was here to enjoy his evening and that details for the course were available from their heads of house. She then pulled him along back to the table. When they sat back down Harry looked at Fleur.

"Why did you do that, Fleur, they were interested in the course."

"arry, eef you 'ad let them they would 'ave pestered you all night. 'alf of them 'ad no interest een anything other then being able to say they 'ad talked to you," she said in a knowing tone.

Harry just gave her a look and then let it go. He wondered if Fleur's determination to look out for him sometimes didn't get a little out of hand. However, food began to appear on the table and Harry realized that he was ravenously hungry. His assault on the offerings would proceed unabated throughout the evening. In between servings he would look out over the students. After sating his hunger for the time being he leaned over to whisper to his wife and she nodded and kissed his cheek. He walked down the steps and made his way

across the dance floor towards the back wall. He approached the table where his ward sat and she looked at him with a smile.

"Hello, sir. How are you and Ginny doing tonight?"

"We're doing just fine, Abigail. How are you?" he replied.

"I'm doing ok. The music is very good and we're all having a good time," she said but she glanced out to the dance floor with a wistful look on her face.

Harry dropped down to one knee, being careful not to get anything on his robes, fearing the wrath of Ginny. He looked at Abigail and said softly,

"Hasn't anyone asked you to dance, little one?"

"No, Harry," she replied very quietly. "I think I've managed to scare them off with everything that has happened."

Harry stood up and offered her his hand.

"Would you do me the honor," he said with a smile.

"Yes, I would love too, thank you," she said with broad smile.

Together they walked out to the floor and he led her through a waltz step that then led into a faster tune that had her more breathless than usual when it ended. She was laughing a bit as she said,

"Oh, that was so much fun, thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome, little one, it was my pleasure," he replied as he walked her back to her seat.

As he walked away he saw a few boys looking in her direction and he thought she'd get at least one more dance before the night was over. He walked up to the dais and he gestured for Ginny to come down.

"Do you want to dance again, Harry?" Ginny asked.

“Not at the moment. Would you mind coming outside for a bit? I’d like to get a bit of fresh air.”

“Certainly, Harry. Just a moment, I’d like to borrow Fleur’s shawl. It’s a bit chilly out there.”

“Of course.”

In a moment Ginny returned and taking Harry’s hand they left by the side door and went down the corridor to the front door. The air that met them when he opened the door was indeed chill but Harry knew they wouldn’t be out in it long and if he needed to he could bump up his internal thermostat. They moved along the path that ran near the castle and he stopped near a spot that gave him a clear view of the sky. He pulled Ginny into his arms to offer her some warmth and he looked up. The stars were bright and the air was clear. He wondered if he stared long enough would a road sign appear that would point him in the right direction. He continued to look for perhaps a quarter hour more and then he suggested they go back in. Ginny agreed readily and they walked back to the warmth of the Great Hall, a warmth that was more than just the fires burning.

Harry's Future, Part 30

Harry stood in the backyard of the Burrow, looking up into the clear, cold, Christmas night sky. He was well protected from the cold with his major Christmas present, a heavy, well made cloak that bore the embroidered emblem of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It was presented as a joint gift of the Weasley siblings. Bill and Charlie had come up with the idea as a way to thank Harry for the idea of the Quidditch camp that had been so much fun for the two eldest brothers. It was pure coincidence that Harry's gift to the two of them had been silver whistles and finely made wooden clipboards, fit for any aspiring Quidditch coach.

He had excused himself from the hubbub of a Weasley Christmas celebration by saying he wanted to try out the cloak and see how warm it was. He had been looking up into the night sky for ten minutes or so when a light breeze brought a hint of scent to his nose and without looking he said,

"Hello, Fleur."

"Bonsoir, mon frere. Que fais-tu?" she asked softly as she came to stand at his side.

"Hmmm? I'm just looking at the stars," he said quietly. "It's funny, you know. When I was a student studying astronomy I was only trying to remember the constellations so I could pass my exams. Now I see them up there and find them strangely comforting."

"How so, Harry?"

"I look up there and see the familiar shapes and if I come out tomorrow night, they will look much the same. I know they will change position a bit over the year, but next Christmas I can look up and see pretty much the exact same picture. I guess it lends some sense of stability to a hectic and somewhat tumultuous life," he said with a smile.

Fleur hooked her arm in Harry's and gazed upward. She let her eyes sweep across the sky and then gave a little laugh and said,

“When I was a leetle girl, I would look up and theenk how preetty the stars were, like diamonds on deesplay for me. Thees days I have not geeven them much thought. I theenk I have been meeseeng sometheeng,” she said and then turned to look more fully at Harry. “You are troubled, mon ami?”

“I don’t know that I would say troubled. Confused maybe, conflicted. I feel I’m moving towards a major crossroad in my life, Fleur. I’ve been given the opportunity to do something that I would love to do and would probably do pretty well at. But to do it I would be turning my back on what I’ve helped create at the Ministry. It feels like I would be abandoning my post. So I guess I’m looking for one of those road signs that the Centaurs talk about to try and help me decide which path I should take,” he said with a sigh.

“I know wheech road that I would direct you to, but I weell not do so, ‘arry. I am afraid you must make that choice yourself. But I weel say that eet ees getting cold out ‘ere and you should come een and be weeth your family. Come,” she said as she gave his arm a light tug.

Harry looked over at her and smiled and with a nod he turned around and let Fleur lead him back into the warmth and noise that was a Weasley Christmas. As they came into the kitchen Bill caught sight of him and called out.

“So Harry, how did the cloak work out?”

“Perfect, Bill. Didn’t feel a bit of cold, except on my face,” he said with a smile.

Ginny came up and handed him a cup of heated, spiced punch. She shared a quick look with Fleur and then reached up to kiss his cheek.

“Ooo, Harry, your face feels frozen. Come into the living room and warm up. Here let me take your cloak and I’ll hang it near the tree.”

As Harry made his way to the living room he thought to himself that no matter what he did in his life, giving the house remodeling to his adoptive parents was the best thing he’d ever do. Having this kind of

gathering with the growing clan in the old Burrow would have been unimaginable. There was an added air of joy in the house tonight as it was announced on one hand that Percy and Audrey were engaged with the hope of a late spring wedding and on the other that George and Angelina were expecting their first child sometime in mid-summer.

Added to this was the profound sense of relief for all to have seen Abigail fully engaged with her 'family' and apparently enjoying herself as well as anyone else. Her presents were not as elaborate as last year. She had given each couple a small water color of varying scenes from around Hogwarts. She in return was practically inundated with art supplies of all sorts from just about everyone. Her absolute favorite, however, was a simple silver necklace from which dangled a small but intricately wrought charm of a dragon, given to her by Harry.

As he walked into the living room proper he saw her sitting on the floor near the tree, looking at some of the items lying there, all the while fingering the tiny dragon. Harry smiled a bit and let Ginny guide him to an empty spot near the fire. She kissed his cheek again and then left him to help her mom with some snacks she was arranging in the kitchen. He gazed into the fire, feeling the warmth seep into the skin of his face.

"All the stars where they belong, mate?" Ron's voice intruded on his reverie.

Harry looked around to see Ron looking at him from across the room.

"Yeah, Ron, everything is where it should be, at least up there," he said.

"What about down here?" his best friend asked.

"I'm not sure about that, not yet anyway," Harry responded with a lopsided grin.

Ron nodded but chose not to pursue it any further. He knew Harry had a great deal on his mind and he was getting more the enough

'help' from the others. He felt his job was to try and take some of the pressure off."

"Fancy a game, mate?"

Harry looked up and smiled.

"Yeah, that would be a great idea, Ron."

Ron grabbed the set from a shelf in a bookcase that flanked the fireplace. They took a spot at the far end of the big kitchen table nearest the back door. In moments he and Ron were absorbed in the game and only barely conscious of what was going on around them. They were a number of moves into the game when Harry sensed more than saw someone settle into the chair next to him. After making his move he looked over and saw Eleanor sitting next to him.

"Do you play?" Harry asked.

"A bit. Not up to you or Ron's level but I find it interesting. My dad taught me how to play as a way to help me improve my Quidditch play. The strategy part of it. Do you mind if I watch?" she asked.

"Not at all. Just no bludgers, ok?" Harry said with a straight face.

Eleanor laughed and nudged him with her elbow and then turned to watch Ron make his next move. All in all Ron racked up four wins that night, two against Harry, one against Eleanor and a surprisingly difficult match against Audrey who had noticed the match against Eleanor and asked if she could have a crack at the master.

It was close to midnight by the time the party had broken up and those that were going home left and those that were staying had made their way up to their guest rooms. Bill and Fleur had been installed in the largest of the guest rooms to accommodate the crib that Mrs. Weasley had acquired to make visits easier for them. Ginny and Harry had their usual room and Abigail was in hers. The others had said their farewells and Disapparated home.

Harry lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Ginny was tucked against his side, her quiet even breathing indicating that she was already asleep. Harry was thinking back over the evening just past, particularly when he was standing outside gazing up into the night sky. While it was true when he told Fleur that he was looking at the stars, what he didn't say was that he was paying particular attention to the constellation Draco. While he didn't put any faith in astrology he sometimes wondered what it was that the Centaurs saw when they looked to the stars.

As he began to drift off to sleep he passed through that gray place he often found himself in and on the very edge of his awareness he 'heard' that dry, cold voice he had come to associate with his other self. He had to strain to comprehend it but he was sure it 'said',

"Be wary, the kin stirs."

His eyes shot open and he felt a chill slide through him. He slid out of bed and pulled on his robe and slippers. Quietly he slipped out of bed and made his way downstairs. He pulled his cloak from its hanger by the Christmas tree and slipped it on and quietly made his way out into the backyard. He looked up and found the dragon constellation and he wasn't sure but it looked as if the stars had dimmed slightly. After a few moments the cold started to seep into his bare ankles and head. He went back inside and after hanging up his cloak, he sat down by the fireplace. The fire had been banked but he stirred it up a bit and then added some wood and watched until it flared.

As he often had before he stared into the flames, looking at the way they danced across the wood as it was consumed. He let the flicker and flare coax him into a semi doze until he noticed a form taking shape. Without conscious effort he focused on the form and soon it resolved itself into the shape of a dragons head. It brought to mind the brief glimpses he had gotten of the hybrid he had killed but this time he was able to see the eyes. To him they seemed oddly aware and totally mad. The dry, cold voice in his head said,

"Behold the kin."

The form slowly dissolved back into the flames from whence it came. He hugged his robe more tightly around himself and continued to contemplate the flames. After a while a voice broke into his thoughts.

“Harry? What are you doing down here?” Ginny asked.

“I couldn’t sleep and I didn’t want to disturb you,” Harry said.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“I think the hybrid the spooks are working on is alive. I feel it.”

Ginny came over and sat down next to Harry and wrapped her arms around him. She pulled him close and he covered her hands with his.

“What will you do, Harry?”

“Not much at the moment. So far as we can tell, they haven’t done anything illegal. So we keep looking for clues and watching and wait until something happens and hope we’re ready to deal with it.”

That morning Mrs. Weasley found them asleep on the couch, the fire a pile of embers and ash. She covered them with a blanket from the basket next to the couch and began making breakfast as quietly as she could. Ginny was the first to wake up and as carefully as she could she pulled away from the still sleeping Harry and walked into the kitchen.

“Morning, Mum,” she said through a stifled yawn.

“Good morning, dear. Whatever were you two doing on that couch?” Mrs. Weasley whispered.

“Harry couldn’t sleep so he got up and came down here. I woke up and found he wasn’t in bed so I came looking for him. He said he felt that the hybrid dragon was alive. He could sense it somehow. He said he doesn’t think he can do anything about it now because they haven’t openly broken any laws. He’s very worried. At some point we both fell asleep.”

Mrs. Weasley's expression turned grim but she said nothing. Ginny began to help her mother and a few minutes later the sound of small feet rapidly descending the stair case announced the arrival of Abigail. As she got to the bottom of the staircase she saw Harry slumped on the couch under the blanket. She slowly walked over and stood next to him. Ginny and her mum watched as she stood there a moment and then her head snapped up. She turned around quickly with a horrified expression on her face. Ginny motioned her over and she nearly ran into the kitchen and into Ginny's outstretched arms.

"He's going to have to do it again? It nearly killed him last time," she said, her voice trembling.

"Take it easy, Abigail. We don't even know for sure if he's right about the other dragon. And if it does come down to a fight, I doubt he'll do it from a broomstick," Ginny replied.

"You mean dragon fighting dragon. And I was going to ask him to pose for me today. I'm glad I found this out first."

"What do you mean, pose for you?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I've been working a lot on sketching magical creatures that Hagrid works with and I thought maybe Harry would let me sketch him when he was a dragon. Maybe in the field across the road, but I couldn't ask him to do that now."

"I think that might not be the best idea, no," said Mrs. Weasley. "Let's see how he's doing when he wakes up."

Abigail just nodded and began to help Ginny and her mum with the breakfast. They all stopped and looked when they heard Harry stir but it was only to slip down and stretch out, his head resting on the arm of the couch. He had slipped out from under most of the blanket and Abigail quietly went over and recovered him. She thought he must be dreaming because his eyes were moving under their lids.

Perhaps half an hour later, Fleur came down the stairs wrapped in a heavy robe with slippers on her feet and her hair slightly disheveled. She looked into the kitchen with a slight frown since everyone was

being so quiet. Ginny looked meaningfully towards the living room and Fleur caught sight of Harry and her eyes went wide. She looked back towards the kitchen and Ginny waved her over. After some whispered conversation she quietly crept into the living room and crouched down next to the couch. She looked at Harry's face and noticed the same eye movement and as she watched she saw the lids flicker and half open. She let out a small startled yelp and sat back on the floor. Ginny hurried over and was about to offer her sister-in-law a hand up but Fleur stopped her and hissed,

"Look at 'es eyes."

Ginny looked and under the half closed lids she could see the slit pupils of the dragon. She knelt down and laid a gentle hand on his forehead and felt the skin was moderately warm but not alarmingly so. She leaned in and kissed his cheek and gently said,

"Harry, sweetheart. It's time to wake up. We have breakfast nearly ready."

While she was saying this she gently caressed his cheek and the lids began to sink down and then after a moment slowly opened, his eyes normal again.

"Oh, hello there, love. Morning already? Wow, that was weird," he said as he began to sit upright.

He didn't have his glasses on so everything was blurry. Ginny took them from the little table next to the couch and put them on for him.

"Ah, that's better. Blurry just doesn't suit you," he said with a lopsided grin and then as he looked around he saw Fleur sitting on the floor.

"What in the world are you doing down there, Fleur?"

"Oh, uh, well, Geeny and I were goeeng to play a leetle joke on you to wake you up but you looked so sweet and peaceful, we didn't 'ave the 'eart to do eet, yes, Geeny?" she said.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ginny replied, going along with Fleur. “How are you feeling, Harry and what was so weird?”

“I’m ok, a little sleepy still and starving but okay. As for the weird part I was dreaming I was the dragon and I was flying around Hogwarts, like I was on patrol and I could sense something was out there but I couldn’t see it and then I was flying around the Burrow and then the Ministry and back again. It felt like I knew something was going to happen and I couldn’t figure out where. The funny part was I didn’t feel anxious or panicky. Just watchful and willing to wait.”

“Well that doesn’t sound too bad, Harry,” Ginny said. “As to the other stuff, breakfast will be ready shortly and then if you need to you can go back to sleep.”

“Hmm, ok. Are those Abigail’s rolls I smell? Is she over there?”

“Right here, Harry,” came the softy reply.

“What? I don’t get a good morning from you,” he said with a grin.

Seeing his mood was good she smiled back and then ran from the kitchen into the living room and launched herself onto the couch where Harry caught her up in a big hug. Ginny looked at Fleur and with a wink they joined in the melee. About this time Bill came down the stairs with little Victoire held in his arms. He looked at the rugby scrum on the couch and laughed.

“What’s the matter, Harry, the harem in revolt?”

“Bill, what kind of thing is that to say?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“Easy, Mum, I was just kidding.”

“Perhaps, but it was an unseemly thing to say,” she said holding a ladle in her hand. “Especially when one of those involved is your own wife.”

"I surrender," Bill said, his scarred face trying to control a grin. "Harry, ladies, my abject apologies for suggesting anything untoward is occurring."

At the sound of Bill's voice Fleur had backed away from Harry and was now glaring at her husband and Ginny and Abigail were sitting on either side of their victim who was struggling to get his glasses straightened. Abigail looked at Bill and said in her best superior tone,

"Professor, we are not his harem, we are his guardian angels."

"Yes, Miss Westwood, in all honesty I believe you're right," Bill said, the mocking tone gone from his voice.

"Alright, children, enough of that. Come sit yourselves down and have some breakfast," Mrs. Weasley ordered, her ladle held like a field marshal's baton.

Fleur claimed her daughter from Bill, giving him a dirty look and a nudge with her elbow as she did. Bill just shrugged and looked at Harry as Ginny and Abigail were hauling to his feet.

"Well, Professor, what were you doing on the couch all night?" Bill said.

"Well, Professor, I was having trouble sleeping and came down here. I've got a very strong feeling the hybrid dragon is alive and well," Harry replied.

"Are you sure, Harry?" Bill asked, suddenly all business.

"Like I said, it's only a feeling but it seems to be rooted in my other self and it is very sure."

"Good lord, Harry. What now?"

"I watch and I wait and prepare as best I can. I suppose I'll have to start those experiments that the Heads were suggesting."

"What experiments are those, 'arry?" Fleur asked.

“Changing at will, seeing if anger brings it on spontaneously, and just learning how to be a dragon I guess,” he replied.

“Would you be willing to work on that here today, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“What do you mean, Gin?” Harry asked.

“Abigail was going to ask you to pose for her as the dragon so she could do some sketches to go along with the other magical creatures she’s done. After what you saw last night we thought that might not be a good idea, but you seemed to be in a good mood when you woke up and if you need to spend some time like that getting used to it, I thought it might be a good way for you to spend some time together,” she said.

“Hmm, I guess it would be ok. You aren’t expecting anyone out here today, are you, Mum?” he asked.

“No dear and as you know we don’t get much in the way of passing traffic,” she said with a little smile.

“Ok, after breakfast, we’ll give it a go, alright, little one?” Harry said.

“This is great, Harry, thanks, you’re the best.”

“Well, this should be something to see,” Bill remarked.

Harry dove into his breakfast, hungry from the night before and the expectations of what the morning would bring. He was half way through his second plateful when Mr. Weasley came downstairs, dressed and ready for the office.

“Well, we are up early aren’t we? No work today, Harry?”

“No, sir. I had a few vacation days left for the year so I’m using them up. It will give me some time with the mighty mite here,” Harry said, smiling at Abigail.

Mr. Weasley sat down and helped himself to tea and some eggs and toast. By the time he was done Harry had demolished the contents of three plates full. The others around the table looked on in amazement.

"It must be a hollow leg. I can't figure out anywhere else he could put it all," Ginny said.

"My bet is it's converting directly into energy, like in the heart of the sun," Bill said.

"Leave the poor boy alone," Fleur admonished them. "He 'as much to do and needs all the energy 'e can get."

Harry just smiled a satisfied smile and sat back and finished his second cup of tea.

"Terrific breakfast as always, Mum. Thanks."

"You are more than welcome, Harry, dear," she replied.

"Alright, little one, get yourself bundled up and let's see what we can do," he said to Abigail.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Potter, sir," she said with an ear to ear grin.

"You're making her very happy, Harry," Ginny said as they too rose to go and get dressed.

"It's not a big thing, Gin. Your reasoning is sound and if it makes her happy in the process that's all the more reason. I figure I might as well do what I can while I can."

Harry was already walking away from the table when he said the last and he failed to notice how alert everyone became. As he climbed the stairs with his wife, those that remained at the table looked to one another with no small concern. Mrs. and Mr. Weasley began a quiet but serious conversation. In less than half an hour Harry was standing in the middle of the winter browned grass with Abigail across the road standing in front of the wall that ran the length of the house.

“Ready?” he called.

“Yes, Harry, whenever you are,” Abigail called back.

She was done up in a heavy cloak, wool cap and wool knit gloves with the fingers cut back to the first knuckle. She had a sketch pad and a handful of pencils at the ready. Harry gave a wave and within the space of two heartbeats the average sized man was replaced by a very unaverage sized dragon. While they were still able to speak to one another they planned for Harry to stand on all fours so that Abigail could do a quick reference sketch and then she would come close and work on detailed sketches of various body parts such as the head, neck, legs and so forth.

As Harry stood still the ‘dragony’ part of his mind, now stronger in this form, was amused at the lengths he would go to make this small creature happy. But on the outer edges of his new awareness he could feel something stirring. Something unnatural, something not right for this world. He concentrated on this feeling, trying to get a sense of direction or distance but it wasn’t strong enough. He wondered if the creature had just hatched. Something else was trying to intrude on his awareness and as he focused on it, it resolved itself into a tapping on his left foreleg. He swung his massive head down and around and tried to focus on what was making the tapping. Apparently, Abigail was unable to make herself heard so she settled for the simple expedient of walking up and pounding on his leg with her fist. Harry snorted once, which caused her hair to blow back behind her and then he tilted his head so that his ear was closer to her.

“Harry, please. Could you hold your head right there so I can get a more detailed drawing of it, please?”

Harry first used his head to nudge her back a short distance. Then he settled himself down on his stomach and brought his head around so that it was directly in front of Abigail.

“That’s terrific, Harry, thanks.”

He watched as her hand moved quickly across the paper, her eyes flicking back and forth from his face to the pad and back again. When she was done with his head she asked if he would extend his leg so she could get details of his clawed foot. Then she drew the entire leg, then the rear leg. Then she walked down and drew up his tail. Lastly she took a short walk and turned around to sketch the details of his back and sides. By the time she was done her face was red and her fingers were cold and stiff. But her sketch book was full and her smile was wide. She walked back up to stand in front of his head which he was holding just above the ground. She reached out a tentative hand and touched his snout between the broad nostrils.

“Thank you, Harry, this was really special.”

Harry responded with a wink and then gave her a bit of a bump with this snout which set her to laughing. Abigail began walking across the road and Harry was preparing to make the change back when he heard a shout. He saw Charlie race out of the backyard and Harry mentally smiled. Charlie came to a skidding halt in front of Harry and once more the great head came to a hover just above the ground.

“Harry, my god, I can’t believe I’m talking to a dragon. Anyway, Harry, would you mind holding on just a bit. I really would like to get some measurements here, would you mind?”

Harry shook his head and let his tail straighten out behind him. Charlie grinned and pulled out a notebook and began pacing off the distance from Harry’s snout to the tip of his tail. Then he came back and measured the length and breadth of Harry’s forefoot and the claws thereon. Lastly he asked Harry if he would stand on all fours and with a small device and some calculation of lengths and angles worked out the height from the ground to the top of his back.

Charlie finally came around to stand before his draconic brother-in-law and said,

“Thanks, Harry. I appreciate it more than you can imagine.”

Harry pulled back and once more, within two heartbeats, was back to his human self. He walked over to where Charlie was standing.

Abigail had gone into the house to warm herself up. The others had been watching from the big living room window.

“How did you know, Charlie?” Harry asked as he walked up.

“Ginny remembered that I was planning to spend the day with Eleanor in Holyhead and she asked Kreacher to come find me,” he said.

“Eleanor? What did you tell her?” Charlie said.

“I didn’t tell her anything, I just brought her along,” he said and turned and pointed to the window.

Harry looked over and saw the lithe Harpy’s chaser staring at him wide eyed, her mouth covered by one hand.

“Guess I better go say hello,” Harry said.

The two wizards walked up the path to the front door and the door swung open and Kreacher let them in.

“Thank you, Kreacher.”

“Master Harry is most welcome. Kreacher remained in order to give Master Harry this message from Gringotts bank. Also, Mrs. Weasley has asked Kreacher to remain and share a recipe, if Master Harry will allow.”

“Of course, Kreacher.”

Kreacher bowed and stepped out of Harry’s way as he closed the door. Harry turned towards the small group in the living room. Abigail had been stripped of her cloak, hat and gloves and was warming her hands in front of the fire. Ginny and Fleur were looking at him with neutral expressions while Eleanor stood by the couch with a stunned look on her face.

“Hello, Eleanor. Welcome to my world,” Harry said with a crooked smile.

She tried to say something several times and then gave her head a small shake. Finally she was able to say,

“Harry, how, why?”

“It happened when I took that trip to Europe. When I was confronting that old wizard I was so full of anger, rage I guess, that I thought I was going to fly apart. The next thing I know, I was a dragon. Apparently I’m a spontaneous animagus.”

“Animagus, Harry? I thought that you had to turn into something usual or real or, or I don’t know. And the size difference. Where does it all come from?”

“I don’t know, Eleanor. I mean Professor McGonagall turns into a cat which is quite a bit smaller than she is. Peter Pettigrew was a rat, again even smaller still. My dad was a stag which was at least twice as big as he was. I don’t know how it all works but Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall thought it was what I had to do or have done to me to contain all my powers and anger,” Harry said.

A funny expression passed over Eleanor’s face and she looked at Harry again.

“Mass equals energy,” she said quietly.

“What?” Charlie asked as he had come to stand next to Eleanor.

“Harry, you were raised as a muggle, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, until I got my letter at eleven.”

“Do you know what atoms and molecules are?”

“Sure, we covered that in my last year of muggle school,” he replied but not sure what she was driving at.

“Harry, I’m a half-blood. My dad is a wizard and my mum is a muggle. Her oldest brother is what muggles call a physicist. He teaches at a

university. When I was younger I spent several summers with he and my aunt and he taught me some things about physics. Simply put, all the stuff around us is made of atoms and molecules, they call it mass. Apparently, mass is just frozen energy. All your power, all your anger, I wonder,” she said, grasping at something. “All that energy would have pulled you apart but instead it was converted into mass and the only living thing on land that would have that much mass would be a really big dragon.”

“But how?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know, Harry. Fate, nature, the magic in that old castle, or something we have no idea about. I mean why do we have magic powers and muggles don’t? Whatever it is it’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever heard of. And you can just switch it on and off?”

Harry nodded and said,

“Yup, and fly and spit fire, the whole ball of wax.”

Eleanor sat down next to Mrs. Weasley who was holding Victoire cradled in her arms. Charlie sat down next to her with his arm around her shoulder. Harry sat down on the couch opposite flanked by Ginny and Fleur.

“As I said about how, Eleanor, I have no idea. Hermione thinks it may have been there all along. Some things that have happened seem to suggest some draconic aspects if you think about them. The important thing about all this is that it has to stay a secret. I hope you can understand that,” he said.

“I can appreciate that, Harry. Frankly, unless someone actually saw what I saw today they’d think I was crazy. You know, I bet it would explain why you’re such a natural flyer. It’s all instinct,” she said with a small smile. “Wow.”

Harry’s attention shifted to Charlie as a thought worked its way to the surface.

“Charlie, how big does a yearling dragon get?” he asked.

“On average, about forty percent of its adult size, which is still pretty large.”

“How long does it take to reach full size?”

“Eight to ten years, but it varies by species and gender,” Charlie said.

“Then I doubt we have much to worry about for a while. If I’ve only started to become aware of it now it could be years before it’s big enough to be a threat,” Harry said, a small smile lighting up his face.

“I’m sorry, Harry, but I might have to rain on your parade a bit,” Charlie replied. “First of all we don’t know anything about the nature of this hybrid creature. What they are doing may have altered its growth rate. Heck, for all we know they started with a mature dragon and infused the aspects of the basilisk into it. I wouldn’t count on anything at this point, Harry.”

Harry looked crestfallen but then recovered a bit.

“Well, we’re no worse off than we were. It’s the waiting that bothers me so much,” he said as he let out a sigh.

“How do you stand it, Harry?”

This came from Eleanor. Harry looked at her and said,

“First of all, what choice is there? These things have to be done. Secondly, it’s gotten to be a habit I guess. Since I was a first year it seems I’ve been doing these crazy things and getting away with them so I just keep doing them,” he said. “And lastly I have the support of a wonderful family that helps me get through the tough times.”

Eleanor looked at the expressions on Ginny and Fleur’s faces and then at Bill and Charlie and Mrs. Weasley. Then she looked back at Harry and said,

“Maybe I don’t have the right to ask this but what about when you don’t get away with it Harry? How long do you think your luck will hold out?”

Harry looked at her and then over to the flames in the fireplace. In a quiet, somber voice he replied,

“That’s the question I’ve been asking myself quite a bit lately.”

No one said a word for a few moments. Looking for a way to lighten the mood, Ginny tapped the note Harry still had in his hand.

“What does Gringotts have to say, Harry?”

“Hmmm, oh, well, let me see.”

He broke the seal and unfolded the parchment and began to read. His eyebrows pulled down and then shot up and he mumbled,

“Well, I’ll be a crumple horned snorkack.”

“What is it, Harry?” Ginny prompted.

“They tracked down that piece of property up north. It’s in Derbyshire. Some of its unique features include a collapsed farmhouse and a warehouse with most of the roof caved in.”

“Harry, you can’t be serious,” his wife exclaimed.

“That’s what it says. They go on to describe the remains of a partially underground chamber that’s also quite heavily damaged,” Harry said mildly.

Eleanor was looking around and seeing the looks of shock and surprise said,

“What? What’s this all about a farm with a bunch of ruins on it?”

“It would appear,” Bill began, “that the piece of ground where Harry had his fight with the smugglers and killed that Death Eater and

where he fought the first hybrid dragon and led the rescue of his ambushed team belongs to him through inheritance from his god father, Sirius Black. The irony of it is almost too much.”

Harry sat back and started to laugh, low and softly. After a few moments he stopped and thought. Then he said,

“You know it does make a certain amount of sense. If the property had belonged to the Blacks it’s very possible that it was made accessible to Voldemort, who we suspect may have been behind the idea of merging the dragon and basilisk so he could communicate with it and control it. You were the one that mentioned that to me, Charlie, remember? Probably Bellatrix or Narcissa Malfoy arranged for them to use the property.”

Charlie simply nodded.

“Perhaps they were able to salvage some essence of the basilisk I had the run in with my second year or they had access to another, who knows, but it was Voldemort’s creature after all. Once Riddle was out of the picture Travers took it on himself to make it accessible to the smugglers as a way in to the scheme,” Harry said as he looked into the flames again.

“But who’s behind the new hybrid? Is it just the spooks playing with their toys or...,” Harry spoke, almost to himself, and then he sat upright. “Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy. He’s the only one left that had a direct connection to Voldemort as well as easy access to the Ministry. He was always there spreading his ‘charm’.”

“Are you sure of this, Harry?” Charlie asked.

“Of course I’m not sure. I’m just stringing along bits and pieces but it’s something to look into,” he said and then he looked towards the kitchen. “Kreacher, I need your help.”

“Yes, Master Harry.”

“I need to you go to the Ministry and have Milligan come here right away.”

“Immediately, Master Harry,” and the little elf was gone in the blink of an eye.

Harry stood up and walked into the kitchen where he began to pace up and down the length of the table. The others simply sat and watched. Within moments there was a knock at the kitchen door and Harry moved to open it. Milligan was there and Harry waved him into the kitchen. From the living room the others could see Harry show the investigator the note from Gringotts. Then they discussed something in tones no one else could make out. They could however see Milligan’s face and as the discussion went on his usually bland expression started to brighten up a bit and by the time they were done talking he wore a half smile. He nodded once and with a clap on the upper arm from Harry he was off through the back door.

Harry walked back into the living room with a satisfied look on his face. He sat down next to Ginny and said,

“I once told Lucius Malfoy that we were keeping an eye on him but it was only partially true. That’s all going to change. Milligan and his people are going to track him down and trace his movements in the past and follow him around the clock. We may have just gotten a break.”

Ginny gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek and Fleur added one of her own. Eleanor just shook her head, then said,

“When the Minister announced your appointment as Chief of Magical Law Enforcement my dad wondered why he would promote, and I quote, “a kid, no matter how talented he might be” to such an important post. I think I know why now. I’ll have to tell him about it one day when this is all over.”

Harry shrugged his usual shrug which got groans from both Ginny and Fleur and then laughs from the rest of them. Harry joined in and then was interrupted by a groan of his own, from his stomach. He looked over at his mum and asked,

“Um, are we having lunch anytime soon?”

The laughter got much louder.

Harry's Future, Part 31

"Alright, what's been going on?" Harry asked his deputy and two team leaders while they sat around the battered table in the break room.

"Probably the most significant thing right now is the arrest of a wizard attempting to deal in some pretty unsavory banned potions," Maxwell began. "It's something your idea about street policing can be credited for. Our patrollers picked up some talk in Diagon Alley and did some nosing around and fed the information back to Milligan's people. We nabbed him with the goods, some very nasty stuff he was looking to deal in."

"Good work. How are things going with the Auror trainees?"

"It's going well although at the moment it's mostly classroom mixed with some conditioning. I think you remember what that was like," Maxwell said with a small smile.

"Vividly," Harry said. "Try not to rough them up too much. We still need them to fill out patrols. Which reminds me, have we been seeing anything in the way of applications?"

"Yes, sir. We've had a fair number from the upcoming graduating class at Hogwarts and a few reapplications from those that didn't make the cut during the open tryouts. We should be able to fill vacancies without any trouble this year," Maxwell replied.

"Speaking of which, did we ever receive an application from a Beauxbaton graduate named Henri Pelletier. He slipped me a letter when I was there during my honeymoon and I sent him back a message encouraging him to apply. I don't remember seeing anything."

"I think I can answer that, chief," Milligan said. "When I was in Paris before the holidays I was talking to a couple of wizards from the French ministry and apparently the idea about exchanging students and applications and the like has hit a roadblock. Apparently, both sides of the Channel have some firmly entrenched traditionalists and

they've been making a lot of noise about it. I don't think it will last but I wouldn't expect any contacts too soon."

"Wonderful. A perfectly good idea and it's hung up over a bunch of stubborn fools," Harry groused.

"Sir, you can't expect all your ideas to be welcomed with open arms," Muntab said. "Think how we all felt about what you were trying to do at first. If you look at it objectively, you've moved this department further than most of your predecessors combined. Excuse me if I sound like someone's mother, which I am," she said with a laugh, "but you need to be a little more patient. You're young and have plenty of time to see your plans come to fruition."

"I'd like to think I do, and as much as I hate to admit it, Evelyn, you're right. But I don't think it's the time factor. It's the obstructionism. If Milligan had said they need a year or two to work things out, I'd accept that. But having someone stand in the way because of 'tradition', it just sets my temper off."

"Oh, dear, there goes the furniture again," Milligan said quietly.

"Very funny. Ok, Mr. Milligan, what have you got for us?" Harry asked with a mock scowl.

"Now that we have your friend Mr. Malfoy under surveillance we've had the chance to start back tracking his trail. For a former rich wizard down on his luck, he's been doing a lot of moving about. The Ministry didn't leave him all that much but he seems to manage. He's made at least half a dozen trips across the Channel. He's also crisscrossed England quite a bit this last year. We can't pinpoint any contact with Ministry personnel but we're still digging. I wish Miss Abigail could help on this one," Milligan said while holding up his hand to forestall Harry's response, "but I wouldn't ask anyone to peek into that one's head."

Harry settled back in his chair and signaled Milligan to continue.

"As to the hybrid itself, we haven't found out too much more. It seems like they've clamped down pretty hard. No more shipments, no

money transactions that we can uncover. It's possible that whatever you think you felt, however that works, may have marked a new phase in what they are up to. I'm thinking Malfoy may be our best lead at the moment."

Harry nodded and shifted his gaze over to Muntab.

"The only significant action for the team was to help in arresting that dark wizard Maxwell referred to. We've been working on training for forced entry with some emphasis on magicked doors. Milligan mentioned something about a possible need. Anything specific you can share with us, sir?"

"My concern is that if anything comes of this hybrid thing we may have to go after whatever facility they've been using and I'd imagine the security would be pretty stiff," Harry finished.

Muntab simply nodded then continued,

"As to the trainees, I like what I see so far. A lot of enthusiasm and aptitude. Weasley is a very interesting case. He doesn't say a lot, but there's a lot going on under the surface. I have him reading some texts on strategy and tactics."

Harry laughed and shook his head.

"A big part of the reason he went into business with his brother was to avoid going back to school and he thought that being a Patroller would help him get into the Aurors without all the study."

"Maybe so, but he's soaking it up and asking for more. Is he as good at wizard's chess as it seems?" she asked.

"Yup. I've been playing against him since first year and I've only beaten him once and that was after an all night study session and he kept dozing off. I'm sure he loses but it's not very often," Harry said with a smile. "Anyone have anything else?"

He got three negative responses so he concluded the meeting and headed for his office. He thought he'd stop by to see how Hermione

was doing. He hadn't seen her more than a few times since Christmas. He knocked and she let him into her office.

"Hiya, Harry. How are you doing?" Hermione asked.

"Pretty good, Hermione, how about yourself?"

"Great, Harry. I think married life suits me. It was so much fun at Christmas and it's so nice to have someone at home to talk to, at least as long as he's not on duty. We've been having some really interesting conversations lately. He's been reading some books on strategy and the like and he's been asking me questions and it's led to some really good discussions. It's been a lot of fun," she concluded.

"Yes, Evelyn Muntab made some very positive observations about Ron along those lines. She gave him the books. She thinks his ability with wizard's chess indicates talents along those lines. I think he has quite a career ahead of him," Harry said and then a thought occurred to him. "How do you feel about what he's doing?"

"The policeman's wife you mean?" she asked.

Harry nodded.

"It's not easy as I'm sure you know. But I've never seen him happier. He's excited about the opportunity and he feels like he's really standing on his own, making a real contribution. He appreciates your support but he realizes he's doing it on his own. It's been great to see, so I'm willing to live with the rest," Hermione said.

Harry smiled at her and then asked,

"So how are things going with the negotiations? I'm sorry I haven't been too involved lately."

"Harry, whatever happened to the idea of you being able to stand back and let others work on ideas you help start? Believe me, we have things well in hand and we're making solid progress. I will say that the Centaurs haven't had much to say lately. Do you think it has to do with what you were talking about before the holidays?"

"I would think so. I'm not sure how but I think they feel something. Whatever is going to happen I think it's going to be sooner rather than later. I'm heading up to Hogwarts in a bit. I need to start working on my other self I guess you'd say."

Hermione leaned forward and gripped Harry's forearm.

"Do you remember what I said to you that time when we were going after the Sorcerer's Stone. About you being a great wizard?"

"Yes, it's not something I'm likely to ever forget," Harry said.

"I meant it then, Harry, but I didn't really know what I was talking about. Believe me when I say you have it in you to be the greatest practitioner of magic our world has ever known. I know you'll never admit that to yourself but don't be surprised that the rest of us see it that way. Just don't doubt yourself or your judgment. I know you will get through this and go on to do really great things. And we'll be there to back you up every step of the way," she finished with a tight smile and a last squeeze on his arm.

Harry smiled back a bit and then stood up and motioned for Hermione to do the same. He took a step forward and said,

"I know I shouldn't do this at work but..."

He reached out and pulled her into his embrace and held on for a few minutes. He felt her hold on him tighten and then they separated.

"You're the best, Hermione," Harry said softly.

Then he turned and left her office and made his way up to the Atrium to leave for Hogwarts. He Apparated to his usual spot and he took the time to take a slow stroll along the pathway stopping to contemplate a few of the familiar names. It had snowed recently but someone had cleared the walk of the few inches that had fallen. He took out his wand and left a few flowers here and there. By the time he was back on the road to the Hogwarts gates he felt a little better about his plans. He walked up to the doors and let himself in. He timed his arrival so

that lunch was just about to begin. He walked in to the Great Hall and hovered by the senior end of the Gryffindor table. He watched as the first students began to come in and they waved and said hello. He smiled and waved back. When some senior Gryffindors entered he asked if they had room and he was eagerly greeted and seated.

“So how was everyone’s Holiday break?” Harry asked.

He got a number of affirmative responses and as he settled in the conversation grew to cover the upcoming inaugural club Quidditch season. Ron’s idea caught on big and a number of teams were formed and the upcoming Saturday would be the first matches. Madame Hooch had recovered but she only felt up to handling the first match. Bill volunteered to referee the second and Charlie the third. It looked like Harry’s Christmas gifts were going to get a workout. Once Harry demolished his lunch he went up to the dais to speak to the Head.

“Professor Potter, so nice to see you. I trust your Holidays went well,” she said with a perfectly straight face.

“I’m doing fine, Professor McGonagall,” Harry said with a half grin.

Harry had to laugh to himself. The Headmistress never seemed to fail to greet him as ‘professor’ since he agreed to the sabbatical year.

“I’ve decided that I need to start taking that other issue more seriously,” he said quietly. “Do you have a few moments to spare?”

“Of course, Harry. Head up to the Room of Requirements and I’ll meet you there. Dumbledore would want to be part of this,” she said.

Harry nodded and began walking up to that most magical of rooms. When he opened the door he found the small sitting room, two cushioned chairs and the empty picture frame. He took a seat and waited. The first to arrive was his mentor.

“Ah, Harry, so good to see you. I trust your holidays went well,” Professor Dumbledore said.

“Yes, sir. We had a very good time at the Weasleys’. Something happened though that I thought you and Professor McGonagall should hear about and I have some questions about how I can start practicing.”

The former Headmaster merely nodded and looked at Harry over his small glasses. In a moment or two, the Headmistress arrived and took her place in the other chair.

“So, Harry, what can we do for you?” she asked.

“I had an unusual occurrence, well two really, while I was visiting with the Weasleys for Christmas. The first was what I consider to be the voice of the dragon telling me that the ‘kin’ was stirring. I assume that means the hybrid. The Centaurs referred to seeing me fighting with kin as you might recall,” he said.

Both Heads nodded in response.

“I was in sort of a doze when I heard it and it woke me up so I went down to the living room and sort of stared into the fire in the fireplace. After a while I saw the head of a dragon form in the flames and the voice said ‘behold the kin’. I can’t say for sure but the eyes made it look like it was crazy or something. I remember the eyes of the Hungarian horntail during the tournament and they just looked really angry, this was different,” he said.

“Well, my boy, if what you suspect is true and those people from Mysteries are playing with the essence of a Basilisk the eyes could play a big part in it. They were the most potent of weapons for those creatures,” Dumbledore said.

“I’ll have to remember that,” Harry replied.

“You said there were two occurrences, Harry, were those they or is there more?” the Headmistress asked.

“Yes, there was another. I fell asleep after a while and I dreamed I was the dragon and I was flying around Hogwarts, then the Burrow and then the Ministry and back again. It felt like I was flying a patrol,

watching and waiting for an attack or something. Funny thing was I felt calm about it, just very watchful but not anxious or scared.”

“Most interesting, Harry. It seems that your ‘other self’ as you’ve phrased it is able to sense the awareness of the hybrid yet feels reasonably confident that it can be handled. It appears that you are now forewarned and my guess is that is why you are here, to begin preparation for what may come, yes?”

“Yes, sir. I was looking for some suggestions on how and where I might be able to spend some time getting accustomed to the dragon. I’ve only made the transformation a few times and have only flown the one time,” Harry said.

“With students in attendance, the Quidditch Stadium is no longer an option, Harry,” Professor McGonagall said. “However, I might suggest looking beyond the hills behind Hogsmeade, where Sirius and then Hagrid hid in that cave, you’d find some pretty rough country with few if any inhabitants. It could be a place to launch and land. With cloud cover like today you’d be able to fly and maneuver with little chance of observation and there is nighttime as well.”

“Thanks, Professor, that’s a good idea, and I be close by if I needed to ask some questions,” Harry said and then a thought occurred to him. “Oh, by the way, we found out that the farm where I had the run in with the original hybrid and the smugglers is mine. I inherited it from Sirius, so it was originally the Blacks’. We thought that might be the tie in to the experiments and Voldemort and everything. There may even be a link to Lucius Malfoy as the last Death Eater and the spooks that are running this new experiment.”

“Hmm, now that is interesting, Harry. Allow me a moment’s thought,” Professor Dumbledore said.

Harry and Professor McGonagall waited as Dumbledore considered what he had been told. After a few moments he looked back at Harry.

“It does make sense, my boy, and it does have the likelihood of something more sinister. I will do my best as my situation allows to delve into it but I think you are more likely to get to the bottom of it.”

“Yes, sir, I think you’re right. I was going to stop by Hagrid’s and see if he’s picked up any rumblings out of the forest. Oh, by the way, Professor McGonagall. Have you or anyone come up with an idea for a textbook for the Applied Magic course?” Harry asked.

“I’m afraid not, Harry. If you can come up on this Saturday as you have been we’ll all sit down and go through it together but I’m getting the impression you may have to rely on your own notes supplemented by the standard texts we use for the other classes and perhaps at some time in the future write your own book,” she concluded with a small smile.

“Yes, ma’am, Ginny and I were planning on coming up so we’ll do that. Thank you for taking the time to see me today, I really appreciate it,” Harry said.

“Not at all, my boy. I’m only too happy to be of assistance,” Dumbledore replied.

“Absolutely, Harry,” Professor McGonagall offered.

Harry smiled at them both and then left the room and started his walk to Hagrid’s hut. A path had been cleared and as he approached he was greeted by the booming bark of Norbie. Abigail must be in class, Harry thought to himself. After exchanging greetings with the big Mastiff, Harry walked the last few paces to Hagrid’s hut. He saw his friend in the back tending to some hutches.

“Hello there, Hagrid. Got a minute?” Harry called out.

“Sure thing, Harry. Glad ta see ya. Got summat I wants ta show ya,” Hagrid replied.

Harry stood by the corner of the hut and waited as Hagrid lumbered up and held out his hand for Harry to shake. Then he led the way into the stone hut with Norbie bringing up the rear.

“Takes a look over the fireplace, Harry,” Hagrid directed.

Harry looked over and saw something that amazed him. Above the mantel was a portrait of Norbie done in oils. Norbie was posed in a very erect sitting posture viewed from a three quarter front position. His head was held high and proud and Harry swore if he held up his hand the portrait would have licked it. It was surrounded by a plainly elegant dark wood frame.

"Wow, Hagrid, that's beautiful. It's so lifelike. I'm guessing Abigail did that for you?" Harry asked.

"Yup, gave it ta me jest before the break. Said it was ta thank me fer lettin' 'er spend so much time down here," Hagrid said with a smile. "She's really summat special, that one is."

"I wanted to thank you, too, Hagrid. She had a pretty rough time of it there and you and Norbie really helped her get through it," Harry said quietly. "I also wanted to see if you've picked up anything new out of the forest. I've had a few warnings from up here," he said tapping his forehead, "and I was thinking maybe you might have heard something from the Centaurs."

"What kinda warnin's, Harry?"

Harry explained what he experienced to Hagrid. Hagrid's bushy eyebrows pulled down in a brief scowl.

"Sounds dicey, Harry. As fer them Centaurs, I haven't seen hide nor hair of 'em in a few weeks. Which sez a lot right there."

Harry just nodded. He spent a few more minutes talking with Hagrid and then he left to make his way back to the Ministry to watch and wait some more. In the weeks that followed Harry tried to spend at least a part of two different days each week in the air above and around Hogwarts. He would Disapparate with broom in hand to the memorial park and then fly up into the hills to a spot he found which was just big enough to accommodate his bulk when he made the change.

He would then spend several hours in the air acclimating himself to the abilities of the dragon in terms of speed, climb, dive and changes

in direction. It amazed him to think at how agile a creature of such bulk could be and he surmised that it had to be the magic of the dragon more than the physics of flight that permitted it. He also took time to talk with Charlie about what he had observed over the course of his studies of dragons in terms of how they would fight in order to gain some insight into what might occur.

On Saturdays he would continue his work with the Professors to refine and expand the course material he was preparing and he had the staff at Flourish and Blotts working frantically trying to locate what might prove to be suitable material. One volume he was going to list as required reading was titled "Thoughts on Magic in a Mundane World" by Marcel Fournier in a translation from the original French. He thought it contained some interesting insights on how magic might be used in everyday situations without drawing the attention of muggles.

He also found time to take in a few of the club Quidditch matches with Ginny and they found it to be very interesting. With a set time limit, the flyers didn't feel a need to pace themselves for the potential of a marathon session so the action tended to be faster. The possibility of winning without catching the snitch tended to put more emphasis on scoring and keeping. It made for quite an exciting experience for both the players and the fans. When he told Ron about what he was seeing Ron smiled and said he would make sure to get to see some matches.

Much to Harry's frustration, the increased surveillance on Malfoy wasn't turning up very much. He was concerned that his inspiration had come too late. It was obvious that the man was spending a great deal of time meeting and talking to various individuals within the wizarding community, most of whom could be described as traditional, some of whom were positively reactionary. If nothing else it gave them an idea of where some trouble might come and who might cause it. And try as they might they couldn't pinpoint the location of the facility that was being used for the experiment. Somewhere in the Hebrides was still the best bet but they weren't able to uncover anything.

So Harry continued to deal with the everyday matters of running a large law enforcement agency, preparing his course material and waiting for whatever was going to happen. But he was positive something would. It was late in April, early in the evening when it finally did. Harry was sitting alone in his study reading through some course notes. Ginny was with her mum paying a brief social call on Fleur and Victoire. His work was interrupted by a very agitated Kreacher.

“Master Harry. Something terrible is happening at Hogwarts. Something is attacking the castle. The house elves there are very frightened and ask you to come.”

Something inside said ‘the time has come’ and Harry nodded to himself. He quickly rose and hurried down to the front door and grabbed up his Firebolt. He went outside onto the porch and Disapparated to his usual spot and he felt the light chill that was evening in mid spring at Hogsmeade. He sensed the presence of something wrong and then he heard the dull roar from the school grounds. He launched himself into the air on his broom and rocketed up and over the grounds. What he saw was amazing and frightening. A dragon or dragonish creature was on the ground before the castle trying to batter its way inside. Occasional blasts of flame were directed at the doors but they were standing fast. It beat at the walls with its wings and tail. That dry cold voice in his mind turned hot and was bellowing its rage at this interloper.

Harry streaked higher and out over the forest. When he felt he was high enough he dove off his broom to let it fall into the cover of the trees. As he began to fall he thought of his need to be ‘big’ and the need to contain his mounting rage. Within two heart beats he felt his wings boom outward to catch the air and with mighty sweeps he regained his lost altitude. The great green dragon soared out over the school grounds and looked down at its adversary. He circled as he watched as it continued to batter at the walls and doors of the school. He saw red lines of energy flare from windows as someone began to cast spells at it from inside the castle.

From the beast itself the great dragon could sense it’s feelings of anger, of confusion, and something else, fear. Harry tried to make

sense of this but first and foremost he had to protect his territory and those within it. He was curious as well. Why wasn't this creature already rising in challenge like any dragon would? So he let forth with a bellowing roar followed by a lance of white hot flame. This got the creature's attention and it twisted its head up and roared its defiance and punctuated it with its own flame. It backed away from the castle proper and launched itself into the air. Its wingspan was impressive but not as big as Harry. Its neck and head looked oddly proportioned and as it tried to gain altitude its movements seemed jerky and ill coordinated.

To Harry's perceptions it appeared that the creature was fighting itself. Then a thought occurred to him as he himself spiraled higher. The dragon is a creature of the air. It has legs to move about on land but its primary mode of movement is flight. The basilisk is a creature of ground and water. Its legless body was intended for ease of movement through dense growth and through water. If this beast's creators had hoped to fashion a creature that was master of all, they had only succeeded in creating a master of none. As he watched the beast flounder up to meet his challenge he realized this would not be a battle, it would be a slaughter, or perhaps more accurately, a mercy killing.

It was also apparent that the creature was irrational and full of fear. Its thoughts were confused, that Harry could feel. It threw up its head and spouted flame at him but it was wildly off target. Harry chose not to respond but waited for an opening that would allow him to finish it quickly and cleanly. He didn't have to wait long. After spouting another gout of flame at Harry the hybrid had to struggle to keep its equilibrium and this broke its attention on its adversary. In that moment, Harry folded his wings and dropped, covering the distance between them in less than a moment. His legs were extended with claws fully exposed. He struck the back of the struggling creature and dug into its hide with all four clawed feet. As the beast tried to rear in pain and anger Harry's jaws clamped down on the neck just behind the head and bit hard. He felt the bones snap and separate and he felt the struggling creature turn to dead weight as they began to fall. He snapped open his massive wings and with deep strong strokes managed to keep himself and his burden aloft.

He knew where he was headed. In his many practice flights he had come to know the surrounding area very well. He made his way slowly but steadily to a narrow ravine that had no access but from the air. Its walls were too steep and high to allow him to land so he had to get as close as he could and then release the corpse to fall to the bottom. He was then able to vent some of his anger by clawing quantities of rock and debris from the tops of the ravine to bury the body. He was determined that no one would disturb the poor wretched thing for the purposes of further experiments.

It was still well before midnight by the time he was done and as he sat perched on the edge of the ravine he knew he had one more task for the night. While waiting for the hybrid to reach him in the air he had been able to sense the trail of the thing and he knew he would be able to find where it came from. He was determined to put an end to this madness once and for all. For someone to have debased one of the kin in this way could not go unanswered. With one last look at the rock pile below he launched himself into the night air. He passed high overhead of the castle but he could tell that the grounds were full of people searching for signs of the outcome of the battle. He flew on, gathering speed as his fury built.

It was approaching dawn at the Burrow but the house was full of very awake people. After having delivered the alarm to Harry, Kreacher went in search of Mistress Ginny and found her at Shell cottage in the company of Fleur and Mrs. Weasley. When he delivered his message Fleur was the first to react and after handing her child to her mother-in-law she Disapparated from the house with Ginny just behind. When they arrived outside the gates of the school the beast was already trying to claw its way into the air. She could just discern the dark bulk of her husband circling high above and waiting. The two women could hear the commotion coming from the school building but chose to remain outside to witness what was to follow.

"Theese creature, eet ees not right," Fleur said, her words clipped and quiet.

"It certainly doesn't fly very well, that's for sure. I don't think this is going to take very long," Ginny said.

But even she was stunned by the suddenness of how Harry dispatched the hybrid. She and Fleur clutched at each other as they watched him slowly fly away with the now dead beast hanging limp beneath him.

“Should we go see if they need our help?” Ginny asked.

“No, that would only bring attention to ‘arry. We ‘ave no reason to be ‘ere. Let us go and tell Muum that all ees well for the moment,” Fleur replied.

“I guess you’re right. Let’s go,” Ginny said and they popped out of sight.

Now they were all waiting for word from Harry. It was much the same as the days that followed his trip to Europe to deal with the aged dark wizard. At least this time they had some idea of what was going on and what to expect. Kreacher was the first to be alert. He looked up towards the ceiling and said,

“Master Harry comes.”

No sooner had he spoken then the sound of rushing wind filled the house and a pained roar rattled the windows. As they rushed to the windows they saw the dragon on the ground, its left rear leg held up and then Harry was there toppling over into the fresh green grass. His family poured out of the front door as he sat up, gripping his left knee in obvious agony. George and Ron were the first to reach him and as he held his arms up they grabbed hold and helped him to his one good leg. Bill and Charlie were soon there and between the four of them they hoisted Harry up and began to carry him towards the house.

Mrs. Weasley was standing with her husband and they were holding back Fleur and Ginny. Hermione stood to the side, her face half hidden by her hands. As the four brothers carried Harry up the path his wife and the others could see his face wracked in a grimace of pain. Bill said,

“Ok, we can’t all go through the door like this. Charlie, you and I sideways and through and then set him down on the couch. George, get the door.”

Bill and Charlie gingerly shifted Harry around and then shuffled sideways into the living room and then gently set him on the couch. They cautiously placed pillows under the left knee and his head while Mrs. Weasley hurried into the kitchen to fashion an ice pack. Harry spoke between clenched teeth.

“Kreacher, home, my room, the cold bag, please.”

The little house elf didn’t even respond, he just popped out of sight and in less than a minute he was back with the bag and handed it to Ginny. She knelt at Harry’s side and gently placed the bag on his badly swollen knee. This was plain even through the leg of his trousers. As the cold began to take effect, Harry’s grimace began to ease. Mrs. Weasley turned to her husband and said,

“We need a healer but with no fuss. Arthur, do you think you could get someone from St. Mungo’s here quietly?”

“I think so. I’ll try and get Dr. Antimony to come out. He was the one who looked at his leg the last time. Be back shortly,” he said.

“All right everyone, give the boy some room. I don’t think we can get much out of him until we deal with his leg.”

While the others took up seats nearby, Ginny sat on the floor next to the couch and held on to Harry’s hand and spoke quietly to him trying to ease his pain. Occasionally she felt his hand tighten as a spasm of pain gripped him. In what was only a few minutes, but what seemed like hours, Arthur Weasley led Dr. Antimony into the kitchen. The healer looked around the room and gave no hint to his reaction. Fleur helped Ginny up and held on to her hand as Doctor Antimony crouched down next to Harry. He took out an instrument from the case he carried and made quick work of Harry’s pant leg. What he revealed provoked gasps from several in the room.

His knee was grotesquely swollen and already turning a deep black and blue. He pulled out his wand and passed it over the injured area, mumbling incantations. He looked back over his shoulder and said,

“Could someone tell me what happened?”

As the others looked uneasily at each other they heard,

“I fell down the stairs.”

Dr. Antimony looked back at his patient. His eyes met Harry’s, squinting in pain behind his glasses.

“I fell down the stairs,” Harry repeated in a strained voice.

“Hmmm, I see. Well, if that is indeed the case, you are most fortunate that you only reinjured this knee. That kind of fall can be very dangerous. The swelling is blocking a lot of what I need to know so for now we have to work to get that down and ease the pain. You’ll need to continue with the cold packs around the clock and give him a packet of this in warm water ever four hours that he’s awake. Leave him where he is for the first twenty four hours and then try and get him into a bed where he can be more comfortable. I’ll be back in four days to see what I can do.”

As the healer stood up he looked around and then down at Harry and said,

“You know, if I had had to make a diagnosis I would have said a bludger strike from close range.”

He nodded to Harry and then Mr. Weasley showed him out to the backyard. Mrs. Weasley went into the kitchen with one of the pain killer packs and mixed up the potion and brought it back to Harry. Ginny took it and kneeling beside the couch, helped Harry gulp it down. He let his head drop back onto the pillow and after a few minutes his face began to relax. A few minutes later he let out a sigh and dropped off to sleep.

“Well, I guess it will be a little bit before we get anything out of him but at least we know he’s home and relatively safe. I need some help getting breakfast ready. Someone should see to Victoire as well. The rest can keep an eye on Harry. We don’t want him moving about and hurting himself further,” Mrs. Weasley directed.

Fleur went up to attend to her daughter and Ginny sat on the floor and leaned against the couch near Harry’s side. Ron and Hermione went into the kitchen to help Molly and Bill and Charlie and George remained in the living room. George was the first to speak,

“I really should go and let Angelina know what’s going on, but I don’t want to leave in case Harry wakes up.”

“Kreacher, if George writes out a note can you deliver it to his wife, Angelina?” Ginny asked.

“Certainly, Mistress Ginny. May Kreacher return to the Burrow when the message is delivered?”

“Yes, of course. Oh, but on the way back would you stop at the London house and get Harry’s cane. He probably won’t need it for a while but I’d like to have it nearby, just in case.”

“Yes, Mistress Ginny.”

George went into the kitchen and wrote out a note and then handed it to Kreacher who then popped out of sight. George came back in and sat down. Bill then said,

“Ginny, you said that when you and Fleur saw Harry flying away with the body of the hybrid dragon, he looked alright?”

“Yes, it was hard to see any detail but he looked ok and it didn’t look like that other creature had a chance to strike him so I don’t know where this all came from. It had to have happened afterwards somehow. Could he have run into another dragon up there, Charlie?”

“Doubtful. Not much around that area and no dragons that I know of. My work was farther north and west. If I had to make a guess I’d think

he went after whoever sent the thing out in the first place. He should have been able to track its path back to where it started from.”

“I guess we should check the news then. Listen for something about a natural disaster or something,” Bill said with a half smile.

The house began to fill with the smell of breakfast, eggs, bacon and sausage. Harry began to stir and his eyes slowly opened. Charlie was the first to notice and he motioned to Ginny.

“Harry, can you hear me, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” he replied slowly. “Everything is a little fuzzy but I can hear you. Is that food I smell?”

“Yes, Harry, Mum is making breakfast. Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Very,” he murmured. “Don’t get your fingers near my mouth.”

Ginny giggled a bit and then laid her head lightly on his chest and then stood up and hurried into the kitchen. Harry’s eyes remained half closed and he didn’t say anything further. Not long after she left Ginny returned with a plate full of food and Ron was carrying a folding table similar to the ones used after Harry had his ‘fire storm’ incident. With Bill and Charlie’s help Harry was eased into an upright sitting position with a number of pillows jammed in behind him. A kitchen chair was pulled up so Ginny could sit by the table and help Harry eat his breakfast. The pain potion was numbing more than just his knee so after the first couple of fumbled attempts Ginny took over and fed him herself. If Harry objected he gave no indication and just concentrated on capturing as much food as he could as quickly as he could.

Even in his battered state he managed to finish two full plates and drank two tumblers of pumpkin juice. When he was done he pushed back into the pile of pillows and looked over at his wife. He took a deep breath and let it out.

“Maybe you should get something to eat, too,” he said softly.

“It’s ok, Harry. I’m a little too wound up to eat right now. Can you tell us what happened?”

“I think so. I shouldn’t try and sleep after eating all that. Are the others done with their breakfast yet?” he asked.

By now his voice was carrying into the kitchen and the others quickly finished whatever they were working on and came over. Fleur sat with little Victoire in her lap and the rest were arranged around the room.

“Go ahead, sweetheart,” Ginny said.

Harry began to tell them what had happened from the time Kreacher sounded the alarm to when he fell over in the field across the road. Ginny and Fleur nodded when he talked about how he sensed the hybrid was impaired and that he chose to finish it quickly then opposed to any kind of fight. They all wore somber expressions when he described how he buried the wretched creature in the ravine and then decided to back track it to its place of origin and put a stop to it all. He spoke of how he had flown from Scotland to a small unpopulated island at the southern end of the Hebrides following the trail until he spotted a carefully hidden structure, most of which was built into the side of a hill, not unlike what was found on the old Black property in Derbyshire.

He then described how he circled the facility and noticed that a section of roof and wall had been knocked outward suggested that the hybrid had escaped and not been loosed on the world. That didn’t do anything to change his mind about destroying the place so he adjusted his flight path and came in low and targeted the opening with a blast of white hot plasma that set the whole section of the building on fire. He made two more runs on the structure and on the third he noticed several individuals running out of an exit and he turned them into ashes. As he pulled up from the third attack the entire structure exploded, perhaps from some chemicals or some other material igniting, he couldn’t tell.

This was when he was injured. The debris from the explosion peppered his entire body but most of it was small and of no

significance. However, something large and heavy, perhaps metal or masonry struck him on the rear leg at the knee and did the damage. The pain was intense but his anger was even greater, so he decided to circle around the area a bit to see if there was anything or anyone else about. Within moments, a group of wizards ran out of the side of a hill and began firing spells at him but they didn't have any affect. Harry told of how he dove on them and incinerated all but one who had managed to flee back into the cave in the hillside. Harry landed as best he could on the bad leg and hit the entrance with a full blast of fire that blew off the top of the small hill.

Satisfied that he was finished he managed to get airborne although the push off was extremely painful. He knew he had dropped his broom into the forest but he also knew that once he made the change back he would be incapacitated so he made his way to the Burrow. They knew the rest. He looked over at Charlie.

"It was a pathetic thing, Charlie. It struggled against itself the whole time. I think you were right when you suggested that they started with a full grown dragon and forced the change on it somehow. For that alone they deserved what they got, but worse they let it get away and so they were responsible for whatever might have happened at Hogwarts. But why Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

Charlie thought for a few moments. Then he looked over at Harry and said,

"You thought that this is all connected back to Voldemort. Where did his basilisk live?"

"The Chamber of Secrets," Ginny said with a shudder.

"Right. Directly below the castle. Some part of that poor beast was trying to get home."

"The bastards got what they deserved," Harry said, his voice dropping off as his chin came to rest on his chest.

Ginny got up and pulled a few pillows out of the stack behind Harry to let him settle more comfortably to sleep. Then she sat back on the chair and took his hand. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Well, children," Mrs. Weasley said. "We have our answers and Harry needs to rest. I suggest we let him do so. Ginny, I'd imagine you'll be staying here with Harry."

"Yes, Mum."

"I will stay for a while to keep Geeny company," Fleur said.

Mrs. Weasley nodded and the rest began to stand and say their farewells. Mr. Weasley was off to the Ministry and he would send messages back once he informed the Minister of what happened and the cover story. George was for home and then the store while Bill needed to get back to Hogwarts where he would inform the Headmistress of all that had occurred beyond her doorstep. Charlie had the day free so he thought he'd hang around and help keep an eye on Harry.

Harry spent the day fading in and out of sleep, helped along by the painkiller potion. When he was awake he continued to eat like a lumberjack, or several lumberjacks in fact. An owl arrived late in the day from Hogwarts with a message from Professor McGonagall. It briefly thanked Harry for his intervention and that she would come to visit him when Bill informed her that he was able to have visitors. Bill paid a short visit after dinner and gave a brief recount of what had gone on inside the castle when the hybrid attacked. All the students had been herded into the dungeons while the staff tried to fend off the attack. When the second dragon had bellowed its challenge there was a brief moment of panic among the students but Abigail yelled out that it had come to rescue them. She didn't reveal Harry's secret and the students, familiar with her abilities, accepted what she said and started to calm down. Professor McGonagall was fairly sure of what was going on but had to keep them all under cover until she was sure it was safe. By the time they came out the only signs of the attack were the superficial damage to the building and the torn up frozen turf and snow. Apparently the students were so upset that no one got any sleep last night and classes were cancelled for today.

Harry was awake enough to hold a short discussion with Charlie and Bill about the hybrid. Harry was feeling regret at having had to kill the poor creature but he had no such feelings about those that created it. He wanted someone to bring Milligan out so he could discuss a few things with him. Mr. Weasley said he would speak to him in the morning. The Minister wanted to come out and see Harry once he was sure he could handle it. Harry drifted off to sleep again after being given more of the potion. His family sat around the living room, making sure the cold bag was still working and generally keeping an eye on him. Ginny was already in bed, as she was going to take the early morning shift to watch him and make sure he would get his pain relief.

"I wonder if Eleanor was right that day," Charlie said. "Maybe he can't expect his luck to continue. I mean, as big as he was, he gets hit by debris in the worst possible place. Is someone or something trying to give him a message or was it just the weirdest coincidence ever?"

"I hope he decides it's time to quit. He's suffered enough," Mrs. Weasley said. "Far more than enough."

The discussion went on well into the night while the subject of their concern slept on. The pain in his knee began to worm its way into his consciousness shortly after midnight but Ginny was there to give him his potion and talk to him for a while. They didn't speak of anything too important as he couldn't put together too many coherent thoughts and Ginny thought it would be unfair to try and coax a choice from him in such a state. He fell asleep around half an hour later and didn't move until after dawn.

When he woke up Ginny was sitting across from him, sipping from a cup of tea. His glasses were taken off so he couldn't really make out much of anything but he was able to hear someone moving about in the kitchen. He looked back at the fuzzy shape that was Ginny and said,

"You guys are up early this morning."

"You sound stronger this morning, Harry," Ginny said.

"I guess all that food I ate yesterday has done some good then. I don't remember much of anything besides food and drifting in and out of sleep. Did I tell you what happened?"

"Yes, Harry. I think so. Getting the alarm from Kreacher, the fight, burying the hybrid up in the hills and then destroying the place where they created him and then you getting hurt and coming back here."

"Hmm, yeah, that sounds like all of it. Worse sort of luck getting hit on the knee like that," he said.

"Yes, it was almost like someone was trying to tell you something," Ginny said casually.

"Maybe," he replied.

Ginny was wise enough not to push. Instead she rose and went into the kitchen and brought back a tray with some rolls and a small dish with butter in it.

"Mum and I kept busy while you were sleeping yesterday, sweetheart. We suspect you'll be hungrier than usual for the next few days so we thought we'd get ready."

She set the tray down on the small table and buttered the rolls for Harry and then sat down and watched him eat. She smiled a little as she watched him try to eat the rolls as quickly as he could while at the same time not covering himself with crumbs. As he ate, the rest of those in the house came down for breakfast, each stopping to ask Harry how he was feeling. Harry did his best to reassure them around mouthfuls of the flaky breakfast rolls.

Ginny took the time to look at Harry's knee. The swelling was greatly reduced but still significant. The color, however, was enough to make one's stomach twist. The band of bruising wrapped completely around his knee and half way up his thigh and down his calf. It was deep purple with yellow and black streaks. She gave him a wan smile and then after checking to see that the bag was still cold, she placed it back on his leg.

"I guess we should see about getting you up to our room after breakfast, Harry," she said after resuming her seat.

"Do I really have to?" Harry asked. "This couch is very comfortable and I like being able to see everyone. If I'm stuck upstairs," he tailed off shrugging.

"If he's comfortable I say let him stay where he is, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley called out from the kitchen. "But we will need to get him cleaned up and into some pajamas or something."

"Probably after his next dose of potion. Otherwise he's going to be in a lot of pain," Ginny replied.

Mrs. Weasley and Harry both nodded in agreement. Mrs. Weasley carried over a plate loaded with eggs, sausage, and fruit. Harry looked at the fruit with raised eyebrows.

"You may be a dragon when you choose to be, dear, but we humans need our fruits and veg. Eat it all," she said with her best motherly tone of voice.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said as he began to attack the plate.

As he was finishing the first plate, Mr. Weasley came over to say good bye for the day and affirm that he would have Milligan come out to see him. Harry tried to say thank you but with a full mouth he simply shook his dad's hand. He had worked his way through a second plate by the time Fleur had finished her breakfast and she came to sit across from Harry and Ginny with the nearly year old Victoire on the floor in front of her, playing with various toys. Harry looked down at her and said,

"Hard to believe it's been nearly a year already. Has she started walking yet?" Harry asked, his voice fading a bit.

"Not yet, 'arry, but she ees pulleeng 'erself up on thee furniture so eet weell not be too much longer," the proud mother replied with a smile.

Harry smiled in return but any further discussion was cut off when there was a knock on the kitchen door. Mrs. Weasley answered it and let in the tall lanky Milligan. She directed him to the living room and when he saw his boss lying on the couch he shook his head with a wry smile.

“Morning, Chief,” was all he said.

“Hello, Milligan,” Harry replied. “I don’t know how much longer I’ll be awake so I need to make this fast. There’s a small, uninhabited island at the south end of the Hebrides where that facility we’ve been looking for was. You and yours need to get out there and see if anything is left.”

Milligan nodded and said,

“We’re already on it, chief. We put a few things together and figured out what was going on.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, internally a little alarmed.

“We had the report about the attack on Hogwarts, your father-in-law telling us you were hurt and then the muggle reports of some sort of explosions on that island you mentioned so we put the pieces together.”

“And?” Harry prompted.

“We figure it went like this. You got the alarm from your house elf of the attack and you responded. Shortly after you arrive the second dragon shows up. A rather big fellow we heard. Anyway, a challenge from the second dragon draws off the first and in the fight the first is killed by the second and the carcass is carried away. You choose to follow in the hopes of uncovering something about the origins of the first. After the carcass is disposed of, which by the way has the dragon experts scratching their heads, the big fella flies off with you following and by tracking the trail of the first, probably by scent, it lays waste to the entire place and you got caught in the fallout. And here you are. How’d we do?” Milligan asked.

“Close enough. I told the healer I fell down the stairs,” Harry said with a laugh.

Milligan just nodded.

“As far as the Minister is concerned that’s the story being released to the Prophet. It will contain an announcement that you’re on indefinite medical leave with the Deputy Chief now acting Chief and the Chief investigator, me, as Acting Deputy Chief. It also contains some nice words about how much he appreciates you once again putting your personal safety at risk for the good of the magical community,” he finished with a wry smile.

Harry just nodded and then offered his hand to Milligan.

“Let me know what you find out, but from what I could see there won’t be much left,” Harry said, his voice fading quickly.

“Ok, Chief. Sounds like it’s time I left. You take care of yourself and we’ll keep it held together for you. Just send a message if you need anything,” Milligan said as he stood up.

Harry nodded and as Mrs. Weasley walked Milligan to the door, Ginny brought Harry his cup of potion. He was asleep in minutes. As he slept he dreamed that he was floating on rough water, his body moved this way and that until he finally drifted onto a sandy beach and he could rest again. He woke briefly to discover he had been stripped of his clothes and now was in a set of soft, warm pajamas. He felt clean and comfortable. He also felt what woke him. He turned his head to find little Victoire standing a bit unsteadily beside him, grasping the blanket that covered him. He saw that Fleur was watching with an odd look on her face. Harry looked back at the child and he reached out and lifted her up and brought her to rest on his chest. She snuggled down and promptly dozed off and with his arms wrapped around her, he did likewise.

When he awoke again his niece was still sleeping on his chest and he looked over and saw Ginny and Fleur sitting on the couch drinking tea and talking in low tones. His stomach began to rumble loudly. The

two women looked at him and laughed. Fleur came over to retrieve her daughter while Ginny went into the kitchen to get his lunch.

“Don’t worry, Fleur, I wasn’t going to eat her,” Harry said quietly.

“That was not my worry, ‘arry. She ees starteeng to eat more soleed food. You would ‘ave ‘ad to fight ‘er for your lunch, mon frere,” she said with a smile.

Harry laughed quietly until Ginny bought his tray and then he was quiet until he finished it all. This pattern continued until the fourth day when Dr. Antimony returned. He carefully pulled back the leg of Harry’s pajama pants. He looked at the joint that was still slightly swollen and looked closely at the discoloration that was fading but still prominent.

“You’ve been able to stay off it I trust?”

“Just the occasional trip to the bathroom down the hall. They practically carry me though. No weight has been placed on the leg,” Harry replied quietly.

“Very good. The swelling is almost gone so that should make the examination easier. So, let us see what we can see, shall we?” the healer said.

He took out his wand and passed it slowly over the injured joint while he mumbled incantations. He did this from a number of angles and several times touched the tip to the knee itself. Harry could feel tingles and a warming sensation. He watched the healer’s face but beyond concentration he revealed nothing. Finally he sat back and said,

“Well, it’s a good deal worse this time around, Mr. Potter. The original injuries have been aggravated severely and there are signs of additional damage. Torn cartilage and bone fragments, damaged tendons and ligaments as well as some muscle damage above and below the knee. I can try to heal some of the damage with magic but I would have to say that you may have to consult a muggle surgeon to deal with the rest. The swelling needs to go down more before I can

begin and I'd say you'll spend the summer in a full brace. I'll bring that with me the next time I come out. I read about what happened in the Prophet. I thought you said you fell down the stairs."

Harry shrugged and said,

"I guess I wasn't thinking too well at the time."

The healer nodded and then as he stood he offered Harry his hand. Harry took it.

"Keep the cold on it. Use the pain potion as needed but try to reduce the dosages. I'll be back in a week. Stay off it as much as possible but if you need to move about, do it slowly and with assistance."

"Thank you, Doctor," Harry said.

"No, Mr. Potter, thank you. My daughter is a first year at Hogwarts. Ravenclaw," he said with a smile and then he was walked out by Mrs. Weasley.

That evening most of the family came to visit to see what the healer had to say about his condition. Angelina scored major points with the patient when she arrived with a box full of special medicine, that is, sugared butter cookies. Harry's grin could have lit up the night sky. He was propped up in a sitting position with little Victoire perched on his stomach doing her best to grab one of the special treats. Mr. Weasley looked at him from his spot on the couch next to his wife. He said,

"Harry, if you don't mind, I'd like to let the Minister know he can come out to see you. He's been pretty anxious to see how you are doing. We should probably let Professor McGonagall know as well. Oh, and the muggles have been making a big thing about that island you visited. The speculation is that it was some old weapons storage site from one of the wars and something caused it to explode. The local authorities are saying they were sure there was nothing there," his dad finished.

“As long as they have a reasonable explanation they won’t dig too deep for the truth. I can live with that,” he said with a lopsided grin. “How are things at work, Hermione, Ron?”

“Half the talk is about how long you can keep taking this kind of punishment and the other is about where the second dragon came from. The experts in Magical Creatures are dismissing the reports on size and what happened to the carcass on hysteria. They’re insisting the hybrid either flew off injured or fell into the lake,” Hermione said.

Harry just shrugged which got ‘looks’ from Hermione and Ginny.

“As for the Patrollers and such, your friends are all worried about you, but I’ve been keeping them up to date,” Ron said. “Some are wondering if you’re going to have to retire or something. I guess the ‘indefinite’ part of the medical leave has them guessing.”

“Me too. But I’ll have to deal with it at Hogwarts first. Guess I should ask Professor McGonagall about a first floor classroom,” Harry said.

He had his chance to ask two days later when the Professor arrived shortly after breakfast. Harry was down to half a dose of pain killer as long as he kept the cold bag on it several times a day. When she was ushered into the living room by Ginny she looked down at Harry from over the top of her glasses. It was clear she was having a difficult time controlling her emotions. After a moment she sat down in a chair offered by Ginny and she tried again.

“Harry. Even though the events of the other night were not entirely unexpected I can assure you they were no less shocking and frightening. I know the truth of course but the story as released to the Prophet has been sufficient to answer the many questions that were raised once everything had calmed down. All of the students as well as the faculty are quite concerned about your injuries. Poor Miss Westwood has had to fend off any number of requests to take a look at you, as it were, to get an update on your condition. I will of course report to them this evening that we’ve spoken and how you are doing. So, how are you doing?” she asked, almost out of breath.

Harry was sure that the length of the Professor's comments had as much to do with trying to calm herself as to relay the information intended. He smiled at her and said,

"The knee is something of a wreck. The healer even said I may have to look to a muggle surgeon to fix what can be. Dr. Antimony will do what he can, but it'll be heavily braced and it may be the end of the summer before I can get around much. I may have to request a ground floor classroom. I don't think stairs will be an option for a while, unless Professor Flitwick wants to float me around the school with his wand," he said with a grin.

"I daresay he wouldn't object, nor would anyone else, but as to the first I think that can be arranged. We may have to juggle things a bit but we should be able to sort it out. It would also keep you in close proximity to the DADA classroom which would make sense. I presume this will put a crimp in your participation in this years Quidditch camp," she said.

"I would think so, Professor, but I'm sure we'll have more than enough help. While I've got you here, can we talk a bit about the scholarship program? Do you know how many will be needing help?" he asked.

"Harry, you're laying here nursing serious injuries and you want to discuss scholarship applicants?"

"It's not like I have much else I can do so the thought had occurred to me," he replied.

"Well, had I known I would have brought the list, but as I recall we have seven potential first years that could use help, three of which will need full scholarships," the Professor said.

"Ok, so when you send their letters you'll indicate that they are getting help?" he asked.

"That's right, Harry. We'll include a certificate that will indicate that they can obtain books, supplies, robes, and wands with the bills being forwarded to the fund at Gringotts."

“Great, thanks for setting that up, Professor,” Harry said with a smile.

“Your welcome, Harry,” she said with an odd look. “Well, I think that I should be on my way. I don’t want to tax you so soon into your recovery. If you feel you need more consultations concerning your course preparation, send a message and we will make arrangement, Harry, but concentrate on getting well for now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Later that day he got a second visit, this time from Minister Shacklebolt. Mrs. Weasley escorted him into the living room where Harry was playing with Victoire, a game involving hidden toys in Harry’s hands and her trying to pry them loose. Harry looked up to see the Minister smiling down at him.

“Harry, I’m pleased to see you’re doing better,” Shacklebolt rumbled. “Arthur has been keeping us up to date of course, but I was anxious to see for myself.”

“Thank you for coming out, sir,” Harry said, relinquishing the hidden treasure to the baby.

The Minister sat down across from him and looked at the young man and mentally did an inventory. Head scar, burn scars on left leg and arm, severely injured knee, possibly permanently. Aurors tended to get banged around a lot but this was a bit much, particularly when he considered how important Harry was to the wizarding world. But he kept this line of thought to himself. Instead he said,

“It’s nothing, Harry, and since it would be some time before you would be coming to the Ministry I didn’t think I should wait. Quite frankly, Harry, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. If we were muggles there would be medals or knighthoods or whatever. There doesn’t seem to be anything within the Ministry for recognition of the kind of bravery you’ve displayed for most of your life. There should be something but I can’t find any mention of one,” the Minister said, seemingly embarrassed.

Harry was about to respond when someone else beat him to it.

"How about an early retirement, Kingsley," Mrs. Weasley said from her place in chair at the far end of the living room.

Everyone turned to her.

"The boy, alright young man, has endured more injury for all our sakes than anyone has the right to expect. As someone observed just recently, how long can we expect his luck to hold out? I know that being an Auror is about risks but even poor Mad Eye never faced more than a dark witch or wizard and look what shape he was in at the end. Harry has battled basilisks, mad dragons, dozens of wizards and on and on. How long can we expect him to survive at this rate?" Molly asked.

"Mum..." Harry began.

"I know, son, I'm not supposed to interfere but I'm only voicing what your entire family is feeling. Even as a great bloody dragon you get hurt. Where does it all end?"

"Molly, I understand your concern. I feel much the same way myself, but I can't make that decision for Harry, he has to make it himself. He has the summer on leave and then his sabbatical to think about it. But at least understand that I will support whatever decision he makes. He has accomplished great things at the Ministry in a short time. My guess is no matter what he decides to do it will result in greater things for our community as a whole," Shacklebolt said as he stood up.

"You take care of yourself, Harry. Your primary concern is healing. Your department is in good hands and we'll send along messages to keep you up to date and I'm sure those family members at the Ministry will let you know what's going on. I'll stop by now and then to see how you're doing as I'm sure will some of the others. Good bye for now, Harry, everyone."

Harry shook the offered hand and watched as the Minister left, escorted by his mum, who spoke to her old comrade a bit more by the door. Harry looked back at Victoire who was now trying to pull

one of Harry's fingers to her mouth for a nibble. He wondered what the future held for her, and for him. He thought about what his 'mum' had said and knowing what the general opinion of his family was. He knew what the answer should be, he just wasn't sure what it would be.

Harry's Future, Part 32

Harry was sitting at the kitchen table in the Burrow looking at renderings of the proposed Potter house. Once Doctor Antimony had made the attempt to heal some of Harry's knee injuries, and failed, Harry's knee was wrapped in a heavy brace. Harry had explained the theory of the ancient magic resisting changes to Harry and the healer had found his efforts thwarted just as Madame Chevalier had when Harry and Fleur had visited Beauxbaton. As the healer was leaving he couldn't help but express his dismay at the idea of magic that could keep the killing curse at bay but couldn't deflect a chunk of errant debris. Harry could only shrug and smile.

Now he was sitting with the chair placed sideways to the table, his injured and braced leg propped up on a stool-like support that Mr. Weasley had whipped up in his shop. Harry was impressed at the workmanship. Apparently his 'dad' had hidden depths. What had his attention at the moment were pictures of the house that Ginny and Abigail, with some input from Harry, or so he thought, had put together. Harry looked at his wife who was sitting across the table from him.

"Um, love, isn't this a bit larger then what we had been discussing? This looks more like a lord's manor or something."

"I think your exaggerating a bit, Harry. Some of those places go to four stories; this is only two with an attic. I know what you've said in the past, sweetheart, but try to understand my reasoning. We've talked about three kids, so that means four bedrooms. I want to have at least two guestrooms plus we need to make accommodations for Abigail if she continues to live with us after she graduates, which all things considered I think is a good possibility. Then there's the bathrooms, a library for you, living room, dining room and a good sized kitchen so Kreacher can keep up with the cooking."

"Whoa, whoa. What do you mean, library? I just need a small study," Harry objected.

"No, my dear, your collection of books is already starting to crowd your study at home so I have to plan for a lifetime of collecting and

reading. We'll need to have room for the kids so they won't be underfoot and for you to have friends and family around. Remember what I said about you needing them around you," she said and her tone turned serious. "Harry, do you love me?"

"Of course I do, more than my own life," he said quietly.

"I appreciate the sentiment, Harry, but please don't put it that way. And I love you, more than I ever thought it would be possible all those nights I used to dream about being Mrs. Harry Potter. I want you to have this, my dear man, because you deserve it. You deserve a home that is comfortable and full of love and life and laughter," she said as she held up a picture that showed a three quarter view of the proposed house. "This is it. I realize it isn't my money that is going to build it but at least I'll have felt that I've had a big part in designing it so it will seem like I'm giving it to you."

"Actually, Gin, half the money will be yours since half of what I have became yours the moment we said 'I do'. But I understand what you're saying. It's just that it's not really me, you know."

"Yes, I know, Harry. And that's one of the things I love most about you but if you trust me and let me have my way in this I can assure you, you'll be very happy with how it all works out," she said earnestly.

Harry leaned back a bit to look over his shoulder towards his 'mum' who was working in the kitchen.

"What do you think, Mum? Is what Ginny is saying making sense to you?"

"A great deal in fact, Harry. I wasn't going to say anything about it, but since you ask, I think what she has in mind is right on the mark. You'll need the room and you deserve the amenities. As to the cost, that's something that you need to decide for yourselves, but you've been very generous with what has come to you, Harry. I can't imagine anyone thinking the worse of you for making this kind of investment in yourselves and your family. Not that it should matter anyway," she said.

Harry looked back at his wife and saw the look on her face and any further objections evaporated. He smiled back at her and said,

“Alright, my love, we’ll do it your way. Let’s look for a builder.”

Ginny’s face lit up in a huge smile and she bounced up out of her chair and rushed around to his side of the table. However, instead of her usual ballistic embrace she stopped short and then leaned forward to take Harry’s head in her arms and cradle it to her. He covered her hands with his and kissed them. Without letting go she looked up to her mum and said,

“When are you expecting the others, Mum?”

“The invitation was for dinner but I’d expect arrivals shortly after lunch. It should be a full house since this will be the first time since Harry’s injury that we’ve tried to get everyone together. Even little Victoire’s first birthday was on the quiet side.”

Harry had been looking back at Molly when she said that and she noticed the way his eyes darted away.

“Harry, dear. Don’t feel like that.”

“I know I shouldn’t but sometimes I can’t help it. I’ve managed to put a damper on a few holidays,” he said a bit morosely.

Ginny looked to her ‘mum’ helplessly. Mrs. Weasley walked over to the table with a wooden spoon in one hand and hooked a thumb under Harry’s chin and pulled his head up so she could look directly into those bright green eyes.

“You listen to me, young fellow,” she said sternly. “Those few dampened holidays are a small price to pay for all the holidays and regular days that we’ve been able to enjoy on account of your efforts and sacrifices. So hear me well, if I ever see that look on you face again I will take this spoon and I will redden your backside until you can’t sit down, knee or no knee. Am I making myself clear?” she finished.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said quietly and then he took the hand away from his chin and kissed the back of it.

Molly smiled back at him and touched the spoon to the tip of his nose and then returned to the kitchen. Harry and Ginny spent the time until lunch going through the pictures of separate rooms, exterior views and landscaping ideas. Harry was more than a little impressed by the quality and quantity of work the two had put into this. He would have to thank Abigail when she arrived in the early afternoon, her presence being specially requested by him.

They had a quiet lunch, simple but plentiful, in anticipation of the dinner to follow. Kreacher had spent the morning at the London house putting together several baskets of supplies from their pantry to supplement the Burrow’s. Harry had been feeling guilty about the amount of food that he had been consuming but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had taken great pains to assure him that he was only slightly ahead of what it took to feed the twins when they were home and nowhere near what they had to provide when the whole clan was together. He was already working with Ginny and Fleur on plans to send his parents to the house on the Mediterranean owned by Fleur’s aunt and uncle as a way to repay their seemingly limitless kindness.

The first to arrive for the family gathering were Bill, Fleur and Victoire. The little girl was able to walk with the help of her mother holding a hand and she rapidly, or as rapidly as her little legs would allow, made her way to Harry and sought to climb up on to his lap. He obliged to lift her up and set her carefully on the half lap formed by his good leg. She proceeded to try and hug him like her mother and Bill laughed.

“I guess you have another angel in the making, Harry,” he said smiling fondly at his daughter.

“I seems I need all I can get,” he replied as he held out one arm to hug Fleur as best he could.

She kissed the top of his head and said, looking down at him,

"I theenk the theeng I 'ate most about your injury, 'arry, ees that eet deprives me of a proper 'ug from you."

"I know, Fleur, I miss them, too, but don't worry. I'm keeping track and I'll make up for it once I get better. We're up to twenty three," he said with a straight face.

As the afternoon proceeded various other family members arrived. Percy and Audrey were next and both were showing visible signs of nerves as their wedding was in two weeks. Ron and Hermione were close behind and within minutes of their arrival Harry and his best mate were immersed in a game of wizards' chess. A chorus of hellos from the living room signaled the entrance of Abigail via the floo network. After exchanging greetings with those in the living room she hurried over to Harry's side and threw her arms around his neck.

"It's so good to see you, Harry. You should have let me come sooner," she said in her airy voice.

"Better that I had a chance to heal up a bit before you saw me, little one. You've had enough to deal with lately," Harry replied, looking at her.

"Harry, you can't keep trying to protect me from the world forever, you know. I'll be sixteen in a few weeks," she said seriously.

"I know, Abigail, but let me try for a little while longer," he said with a smile and turned back to his game just in time to see Ron's queen's knight kick one of his pawns off the game board.

Charlie and Eleanor showed up around mid afternoon. This was the first time she had seen Harry since he was hurt and that had been a little surprising to him. He had asked Charlie about it but he said he wasn't at liberty to discuss it. Charlie greeted Harry with his usual good natured smile and handshake. Then he made eye contact with Eleanor. He got the impression that she wasn't happy to see him but he waited to let her make the first move. After a few moments she simply placed her hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze and then walked past to find a seat in the living room. Charlie followed behind looking disturbed.

When Harry looked back over at Ron the look they shared was one of incomprehension but inwardly Harry thought he knew what was going on. He would have to wait to see if he was right.

The last to arrive was George and Angelina. They arrived bearing gifts. Several bakery boxes were placed on the table nearby, but not within reaching distance of Harry. He looked at them and said,

“Hey, what’s that all about? You playing games with me?” he asked.

“No, mate, we just thought that we’d give everyone a fair shot at them. Otherwise there’d be nothing left but the boxes and bits of string. This is for you, however,” George said and handed Harry a small box that contained half a dozen of his favorite cookies.

“Ah, I knew you wouldn’t forget about me,” Harry said with a wide grin.

He undid the string and opened the box, taking out two cookies, one of which he slid across the table to Ron.

“Cheers, mate,” Ron said as he made quick work of the treat.

Dinner was still an hour away but Mrs. Weasley chased Harry and Ron so she could get things set up. Ginny was sitting in the living room and talking to Abigail, most likely about having gotten Harry to agree to the house as the two had envisioned it. Harry was using a pair of crutches now to get around, the heavy brace wrapped around his leg over his pants. Ginny and Abigail shifted around to let him sit on the couch with the left leg supported on the cushions.

“So you like the house, Harry?” Abigail asked.

“Yes, you and Ginny did a wonderful job. It’s a bit more than what I was thinking but Ginny’s reasons make sense so that’s what we’re going to go with. Thank you,” Harry said with a smile.

While he was talking Victoire wiggled down onto the floor and tried to make her way over to Harry. Ginny reached out a hand so that the toddler had something to hold onto as she let go of her mother’s hand.

She tottered across the floor and when she was at the couch she let go of Ginny's hand and stood looking up at her uncle, holding tight to the couch cushion. Harry returned her serious gaze and then lifted her up and sat her on the cushion propped against his bad leg. She immediately began an intense examination of his right hand.

"She certainly finds you fascinating, Harry," Bill said as he watched his daughter scrutinize Harry's hand.

"I can't say why, Bill. She's the first infant I've ever had any experience with so I don't know what would be normal. Maybe she's just looking for the toys we were playing with when I was first laid up," he replied.

Harry's eyes did a quick sweep around the room and for a moment they caught Eleanor's just before she looked away. He saw Charlie looking uneasy. He wondered if there was a problem between the two of them, and whether or not he might be the cause of it. His thoughts along those lines were interrupted when he found himself pulled into a friendly disagreement between Ron and Audrey about the relative merits of several different opening gambits in wizards' chess. It lasted until the call came for dinner.

It was a magnificent meal. The combined talents of Mrs. Weasley and Kreacher supported by the two pantries produced a large baked ham and two roasted chickens with all the fixings. The bones of most of one chicken wound up on Harry's plate but when he pushed back a bit from the table he was full and happy.

"Thanks, Mum, Kreacher, that was a great dinner. Um, you know, Mum, it's probably time I started thinking about getting back to the London house and not poncing on you anymore," he said.

"Oh, Harry, do we have to go through this all over again? You know we are more than happy to have you here and we have more than enough room, thanks to you. What's more, with you here, there are more visitors so you are in no way a burden to us," Mrs. Weasley said looking at her 'son' fondly.

"I know, Mum, but you know how I feel. It bothers me to think you have to keep watch on me all the time, that's all," he said.

"Maybe it's about time you stopped thinking about yourself so much, Harry," came a voice from the end of the table, a bitter, angry voice. "Maybe you should be thankful that you have people who love you and care about you so that every time you go off on one of your capers and get yourself all broken up there will be somebody there to pick up the pieces and put you back together again. Maybe you should grow up a little and stop thinking it's all about you," Eleanor said as she stood up from the table, now full of stunned diners.

"Thank you for dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley," she said and then walked out through the kitchen door.

Charlie got up and as he was moving towards the door he said,

"I'll be back."

After a moment of uncomfortable silence Mrs. Weasley said,

"Harry, I'm sure she didn't mean that. Something must be bothering her."

"No, I'm sure she meant exactly what she said," Harry said. "And something is bothering her. I think it started the night after Christmas. When she hadn't been out to visit after I got hurt I asked Charlie and he said he couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me why. I have a feeling they're having some kind of problems over it."

"But 'ow could she say those 'urtfull theengs about 'arry?" Fleur said heatedly.

"Because it's probably how she sees things, Fleur. Come on, Ginny, I think it's time for us to go home," he said somberly as he struggled to get up.

"Harry, you're going to hurt yourself," Ginny said.

“Not if you help me, I won’t,” he replied in a tone of voice that cut off any argument.

She pushed back her chair and made room for Harry to swing his leg out and he pushed himself up to his feet, or foot, and took his crutches and began heading for the door. Kreacher was already there to open it for him.

“Harry?”

He looked across the table and said,

“Not now, Fleur. Please,” he said and made his way through the opened door.

Ginny looked at her mother helplessly and whispered she’d talk to her tomorrow. Ginny saw Harry standing in the middle of the backyard and when Kreacher closed the door behind her she heard a babble of voices arise.

“Harry?”

“Home first, Ginny,” he replied.

“Alright, sweetheart. Let me go first.”

“Ok, I’ll count to ten once you leave,” he replied quietly.

“See you at home,” she said and she was gone.

Harry counted to ten and then Disapparated to the porch at 12 Grimmauld Place. He Apparated without stumbling and found Ginny standing there prepared to grab him if necessary. He gave her a bit of a smile and then the door swung open as Kreacher welcomed them home. Harry swung himself along to his study and was about to sit down when he realized he had nothing to prop up his leg. Kreacher walked in carrying the leg rest that Mr. Weasley had fashioned. Harry looked at it and shook his head. Even after what happened they were still thinking of him. Perhaps Eleanor was more right then she knew. As he sat down and got his leg comfortable Ginny walked in and sat

down on the desk chair. She looked dismayed. Harry waited until she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I don't know what Eleanor could have been thinking. I've never heard her say anything like that before," she said quietly.

"I think it was all too obvious what she was thinking, Gin. My guess is she thinks I'm a self centered twit who doesn't know how good he's got it," he said.

"Harry, how could you say that?"

"I just listened to what she said, love," Harry said with a bitter chuckle. "I think she made it all too clear. I guess something about me rubs her the wrong way. Hopefully Charlie will be able to get some answers. I just hope this doesn't ruin things for them."

They sat there for a few moments and then Harry said,

"I think I'd like to go upstairs, Gin. It's been a long day."

Harry pulled himself up and took hold of his crutches and worked his way out to the hall and then stood looking up the staircase. His was beginning to regret his choice to come home.

"Master Harry? May Kreacher assist?"

"What did you have in mind, Kreacher?"

"Master Harry will please stand still and face the top of the staircase," the house elf said.

Harry did as Kreacher directed and then he suddenly felt light as a feather. With crutches in hand he slowly and steadily drifted up the staircase with Ginny walking slowly behind him. When he reached the top he settled onto his crutches and good leg. He looked back down at Kreacher and smiled.

"Thank you, my friend. That should solve a lot of problems. Good night."

“Master Harry is welcome. Kreacher wishes Master Harry and Mistress Ginny good night.”

Harry and Ginny went to bed but it was quite a while before Harry was able to drop off to sleep. He awoke several times during the night and when he finally got up the next morning and at first his thoughts were fuzzy and disorganized. He got dressed carefully and Ginny helped get the brace back in place. He used the crutches to get down the stairs and managed to get to the kitchen without mishap.

Despite his state of emotional turmoil he still managed to consume his entire breakfast. He and Ginny retired to his study afterwards and began making plans about the house. They were going to need the services of an architect and builder. He had only ever dealt with the remodeling company so he thought he'd contact Gringotts and see if they could point him in the right direction. They heard the door bell ring and they thought it was likely to be someone from the Ministry. They were surprised then when Kreacher appeared in the doorway and said,

“Miss Eleanor MacManus wishes to speak to Master Harry.”

Harry and Ginny looked at each other with raised eyebrows. Then Harry looked to Kreacher and said,

“Ok, Kreacher, show her in and would you bring in another chair please?”

“Certainly, Master Harry.”

A few moments later Eleanor stood in the doorway. Her expression was somber but resolute. She looked at Ginny and then concentrated her attention on Harry.

“Thank you for seeing me, Harry. After last night I wasn't sure you would.”

“Don't be silly, Eleanor. Come in. Kreacher is bringing you a chair,” Harry said.

"In that case, would it be alright if I asked to speak to you alone, Harry?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so," Ginny said before Harry could answer. "Not after what you said last night."

Eleanor sighed and simply nodded. At this point Kreacher levitated in a chair and set it in place and then bowed and left. Harry gestured and Eleanor sat down, still keeping her attention fixed on him alone.

"I'm not here to offer you an apology, Harry. I said what I said and meant every word of it. But what I will offer is an explanation so that maybe you can understand why I said it."

Harry could sense Ginny tense up and he hoped she wouldn't lash out and say something that would ruin her friendship with her former teammate. He waited for Eleanor to go on.

"Do you remember when we were talking the day after Christmas and I mentioned that I had spent several summers with my aunt and uncle and that's where I learned something about muggle physics?"

"Yes, I recall that," Harry replied.

"The fact is I spent every summer home from Hogwarts with them. At my insistence. I couldn't stand the idea of spending more than a few days at home with my parents. My father is a wizard from a wealthy pure blood family. He was something of a renegade in his younger days so he thought the idea of marrying a muggle was a way to put a finger in the family eye so to speak. My mother was something of a self styled mystic and found the whole magic thing irresistible. The problem was they were totally unsuitable for one another. By the time I was old enough to know what was going on the situation had deteriorated to the point that they should have gone their separate ways. But my father could never admit he made a mistake and mother was too fond of the comfortable life and the trappings of magic to walk away," Eleanor said and then looked away for a moment and then back at Harry.

“My aunt and uncle were muggles who just thought my dad was another mystic like my mom but at least they loved each other and made for a pleasant household, so they became my refuge but they weren’t a real family. So everything I know and think about family is based on those experiences. Fortunately I was good enough at Quidditch to get picked up by the Harpies and they’ve been my family since graduation.”

Eleanor leaned forward in her chair and said,

“And that brings me to you, Harry. We all knew about you as far as Voldemort was concerned and then when Ginny came to the team we learned a lot more. I have to say you made a really good impression when you came to her tryout. So humble and polite. And the way Ginny used to talk about you incessantly. How hard you were working at the Ministry and everything you were trying to accomplish and the dangers you were facing. She used to talk a lot about her family too and the way they tried to look out for you, even when you were at school. I was jealous in a way. You were raised by those terrible muggles and probably had as bad a time of it as I had, maybe worse. But you found a haven and a real family.”

Harry watched Eleanor intently, giving her every bit of his attention as he had that afternoon at the Quidditch pitch at Beauxbaton. He saw the tightness of her eyes, the set of her mouth whenever she paused, and how tightly she was clasping her hands together. He knew that what she was telling him was very painful for her.

“When she asked me to be a bridesmaid, I was so excited. I was going to get to be a part of all that, even if for just a short time, and it would give me the chance to meet Charlie, which I have to admit was a big part of it. I got to meet all of her family and I absolutely feel in love with them. There was so many of them and they were so welcoming and kind. And of course I started dating Charlie and it got to be so much better. And there was you. Always you, Harry. Your ups and downs are their ups and down. Your pains are their pains. When I think of what it must have been like sitting at that table when you so cavalierly asked about what those two healers had to say about you and how dangerous you might be. I just wanted to slap that scar right off your forehead. Charlie told about when Ron took you off

to explain it all to you he didn't think anyone breathed more than twice, they were so concerned about you. You, Mr. Harry Potter, the center around which the Weasley family rotates," she said and then paused as if for breath.

"I'm well aware of how much they care for me and worry about me, Eleanor," Harry said mildly.

"Are you, Harry, are you really? Because if you are then how can you possibly treat them the way you have?" Eleanor snapped.

"What are you going on about..." Ginny began but Harry stopped her with a raised hand.

"How do you think I'm treating them, Eleanor?" Harry asked quietly, his bright green eyes fixed on her face.

"You allow your own selfishness to inflict untold pain and anguish on them every time you go off to save the world and get yourself broken up in the process. Good lord, we all thought that Ginny was going to go insane when you practically killed yourself with that first dragon. This last time, you knowingly come to the one place you know you'll get help but not before subjecting your family to the spectacle of you writhing in pain with that shattered knee. And to make things worse you up and decide it's time to remove yourself from their presence because it's making you feel uncomfortable about being there. Do you ever pay attention to anything that is going on around you, Harry?"

"I try to, yes," Harry replied.

"Well, I must say you do a pretty poor job of it. Do you see the way that Mrs. Weasley looks at you? Or Fleur, or Ginny for that matter? If I had someone that deeply concerned about me I'd never want to be away from them or give them any cause for worry. Do you remember that Christmas, the first one after you and Ginny were married? You were playing chess with Ron and I was sitting in the living room with your family."

"I remember," he said.

“You looked up from the game and we were all looking at you and you waved and we waved back. The reason we were looking at you was because I was getting lessons in ‘life with Harry’. I think Fleur said it best when she said your well being was the greatest concern of the Weasley family. And you have given them so much to be concerned about without seemingly a thought about them.”

“It may seem that way to you perhaps, Eleanor, but believe me I do give them a thought, a great many thoughts. That’s why I try not to be a burden on them. And it is my life, after all isn’t it?” he asked.

“No, Harry, it’s not. Not when you have people who love you and worry about you the way they do. They are a part of your life and have a claim on you because of how your actions affect them. And you’ve completely missed the point about being a burden on them. Being among them to be fussed over and talked to and hugged and all the rest isn’t the burden. The burden is when they don’t know where you are for three days and the burden is seeing you fall over in a field and the burden is knowing that every day you could be walking into a situation that not even the great Harry Potter can come out of alive. Your family are the most wonderful people in the world, Harry, and they deserve better. They deserve a son who is living in the country raising a family and teaching generation after generation of Hogwarts students how to live free of the dark arts and how to deal with them if they run into them. They deserve the peace of mind knowing that the orphan they took into their family is safe and happy and whole.”

Harry continued to look at Eleanor for a moment and then he smiled at her a bit.

“You know, Eleanor, it’s ironic in a way but your feelings toward me are based on the same thing as why I’ve been doing what I’ve been doing. You’re passionate about protecting the Weasleys. I guess the issue is we differ in how we think we need to do it. I have to admit your arguments have merit. In my own defense I can only say that the way I was raised was to stay out of the way as much as possible and not create any more work for my aunt and uncle than was the barest

minimum required to keep me alive,” he said with a crooked smile.
“Can I ask you a question, Eleanor?”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you love Charlie?”

She blinked in surprise a bit and then said,

“Yes, very much.”

“And I get the impression that you care for the other Weasleys very much as well.”

“That’s right, Harry. I think I’ve made that clear enough. Even you, as much as I’d like to take a broom to you at the moment.”

“Then I think you and I need to come to some agreement so that our issues don’t cause a problem for the rest. I can understand how you feel but I think you might want to have a long talk with Mum and Dad to see how they feel about the whole thing. I’m well aware of how they feel about what I do and where they’d rather have me. Ginny and Fleur have been very forthcoming about it. And it might become a moot point anyway because of this,” he said gesturing towards his leg. “But let there be no mistake, whether or not I do it well, everything I do is based on the idea of protecting the people that have given me a life. That means the Weasleys, yes, but it also includes the whole of the wizarding community, and that includes you.”

“That’s all very well, Harry, but it might help to remember that people want to be loved, not just protected,” she said. “I will take your advice though and have a talk with Charlie’s mum and dad.”

“I’d appreciate that and then maybe we should sit down and talk things through. I don’t know that we can ever completely resolve our issues but I think we owe it to the family to try,” Harry offered.

Eleanor looked at him and nodded and then looked over at Ginny.

"I hope that this hasn't damaged our relationship too badly, Ginny. I value our friendship and where it has led me. I know how fiercely protective you are of Harry and what you must think of me right now," she said.

"I'll have to think about it, El, but for right now I think you're way off target on this and you need to give it some serious thought," Ginny said tightly.

"Fair enough. Well, I think I've taken up enough of your time. Thank you for listening Harry. I hope we can work this out somehow."

Eleanor stood up and with a last nod she turned around and left the room. Harry and Ginny sat in silence as they heard Kreacher open the front door and wished Eleanor farewell. Harry looked over at Ginny and then said,

"That was certainly enlightening. So what about it, Ginny? Does any of the rest of the family feel that way? That I'm just being selfish and not really caring what impact my work has on the rest of you?"

"We know you well enough to know it's not about being selfish, Harry. But it has been suggested more than once that your sense of duty is misplaced and that if you care about the magical community as a whole and us in particular you should be more concerned with staying alive and whole so that you'd be around to do the most good for us," Ginny replied.

"And about being a burden?"

"That's attributed to the fact that you have so little understanding about families in general and ours especially. I cringe every time you make some comment to Mum about not imposing or being a bother or any of the rest. You have no idea how that upsets her but she forgives it because she realizes you don't understand. Let me see if I can paint you a picture," Ginny said. "Mum was never happier than during the summers because all her children were there. It really hurt her when Bill and then Charlie left home. Then you came along and it was like she got one back. I remember what it was like being the last one home. She looked so lost. The first couple of weeks of

September were the worst when she had to get used to cooking and cleaning for just a few of us. I can't imagine what it was like when I went off to Hogwarts and it was just her and Dad."

She paused and looked over at Harry, his expression cloudy and obviously disturbed.

"Sweetheart, I know this is difficult to hear but with everything that has happened you need to understand. Molly Weasley lives to be a mum. All the things that she does whether for you or any of us, that you think is a burden, is a joy to her. Why do you think she cried so much about that kitchen and extra rooms. Yes, it was because it was such a nice thing that you did but mostly because she was so happy at the potential for big family gatherings and doing all that cooking. She was over the moon when Abigail showed such an interest in learning to cook. I was too concerned with flying to learn any of it," she said and then got up and came over and knelt down next to her husband and took his hands in hers.

"Understand this, Harry. Not you nor I nor any of the others could ever impose on Mum to the point that she would think it was anything but a wonderful time to have her kids about. I think Eleanor saw that right from the start. What she didn't understand is what was driving your side of it and she assumed it was what usually causes people to behave the way they do. Hopefully you've helped her understand that. The question is do you understand things better now," she said and then kissed his hands and went back to her chair.

Harry sat and stared at the floor for a few moments. Then he looked back up at this wife and said,

"How could I have been so blind, Ginny? How could I not see all that?"

"You've had no reference to draw on Harry but what you've lived through. And let's face it; the Dursleys weren't exactly role models for a loving family experience. They warped your view of how people live and you saw everything that someone wanted to do for you as something they had to do and would be happier not doing it. You saw the protests as just being polite and when you heard 'it's no bother at

all' you figured it masked 'I'd really rather not bother'. You came to us as damaged goods, my love, and we've been working very hard to repair you."

Harry looked away blinking at the mist building in his eyes. Then he looked back at his wife and thought how beautiful and perceptive she was, and how lucky he was to have her and said,

"Come on. Let's go back to the Burrow," he said.

"Are you sure, sweetheart?"

"I'm not really sure about anything right now, but I think we should."

"Alright, let's go," she said with a smile.

She helped Harry get up and they made their way to the corridor. Harry called to Kreacher and when he appeared told him they were going back to the Burrow and would he kindly bring the leg support along. Then they went out to the porch and as before Ginny went first and waited for him to arrive. Once more he made a perfect three point landing and as they approached the back door it swung open to reveal Mrs. Weasley.

"Children, what a pleasant surprise. I didn't expect you both back so soon," Mrs. Weasley said, a slight emphasis on 'both'.

Harry said nothing, but closed the distance between them, then handed off the crutches to Ginny and as best he could balance on the one leg, he wrapped his arms around his 'mum' and held on for dear life. Although momentarily surprised she responded and held on to her 'son' just as tightly. This went on for a few moments and then Mr. Weasley came outside with a tea cup in his hand.

"What have we here? Is everything alright?" he asked.

He had gotten close enough that Harry reached out and flung his arm around the neck of his 'dad'. Ginny had to move quickly, dropping the crutches, to rescue the cup and its contents. Harry finally relented and eased his grip. Mr. Weasley was now free to reclaim his cuppa

and Ginny retrieved the crutches from the ground. Still supported by the firm embrace of Mrs. Weasley Harry said,

“I think I may understand things a little better now. Could we go inside and talk for a while? Maybe a long while?”

“Certainly, Harry. Come right inside. Can I get you anything?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

As they all proceeded through the kitchen door, Harry almost responded with ‘no, I don’t want to be a bother’ but he caught himself and said,

“Yes, Mum, that would be great, maybe a sandwich and a cuppa?”

Mrs. Weasley’s smile widened considerably and unseen by Harry, Ginny was smiling, too.

Harry's Future, Part 33

Harry sat on a couch in the living room of the Burrow after having enjoyed a quiet dinner with his wife and 'parents'. They had spent the entire afternoon in discussion and Harry never realized that talking could make you so hungry. Although he did suspect that his altered metabolism may have been the true culprit. The conversation was prompted by the earlier discussion that he had had with Eleanor MacManus. That exchange, among other things, made Harry realize that he knew very little about his adoptive parents. It seemed that when he had spent any significant time with them it was a result of some injury or illness that left little inclination for reminiscing. The afternoon of discussion had begun once Mrs. Weasley had made Harry a sandwich and a cup of tea. They took up seats in the living room and Harry said,

"Ginny and I had a visit from Eleanor this morning and we talked over what happened yesterday. At this point we each understand where the other is coming from but there are still some issues to work through. I think she'll be coming to you to get your point of view of things. I don't want to prejudice anything you might discuss but a thought did occur to me. I really don't know all the much about you, Mum and Dad. I mean about before I met you all. I know you met at Hogwarts and you got married but that's about it. I thought maybe we could spend some time talking and letting me get to know the two of you better," Harry said.

This started off a fairly wide ranging discussion of the lives of Molly and Arthur growing up, both in pure blood families, but ones devoid of most of the unpleasant aspects often associated with such heritage. Arthur went into some detail about how he first became interested in all things muggle when he was outside one day and noticed his first airplane flying overhead. When he asked what it was and what magic spell kept it aloft he was astounded to learn it was a muggle construct and made no use of magic. He was bound and determined to learn how they did it and that started him on his life long love of muggle technology, or techlogony, as he often pronounced it.

For Molly it was all about the home. Cooking, sewing and gardening were her consuming passions, until she began to notice Arthur that is.

She enjoyed her studies of course but it always seemed to come down to how could this spell or that skill be used around the house. Harry had to smile when he recalled his first time in the Burrow after being sprung from the Dursleys' house and how magic seemed everywhere. Self knitting sweaters, sauces that stirred themselves, and dishes washing on their own.

But his mum's face took on a whole new light when she started talking about her children. Although not his intent, Harry got a detailed run down on all his adoptive siblings. What a joy it had been to home school Bill and Percy, who soaked up everything she presented to them. Charlie was attentive but easily distracted by anything that might have been going on outside. George and Fred were aggressively uninterested in learning anything that couldn't be used to further some prank or plot they were concocting. Ron would work steadily along but didn't really shine at anything until he got a hand-me-down wizards' chess set from his granddad. He proved adept at understanding the interplay of the different pieces and being able to think ahead multiple steps to execute complex strategies. Harry could only nod in acknowledgement since he often fell victim to Ron's forward thinking.

Ginny spent some awkwardly embarrassing moments listening to her mother talk about the first Weasley daughter born in a number of generations. He learned that his wife had been a normally pleasant, sweet natured girl who, when provoked, could turn into a fierce little hellion that on more than one occasion sent this brother or that fleeing a well aimed bat bogey hex or similar curse. When she finally found she could get a broom to do what she wanted there was no holding her down and she received numerous groundings for flying too high or too far a field with the risk of exposure to a muggle. She went absolutely red to the roots of her crimson hair when her mother told Harry how on that fateful day when he met the Weasleys at King's Cross station and Ginny and her mum were left to watch the Express pull away she had looked up at her mother and said,

"That boy really was Harry Potter, Mum. I think I'm going to marry him some day."

When he heard this Harry looked over at this wife and said,

"I'm glad you were right, love."

She smiled through her embarrassment and gripped his hand in hers. They stopped the conversation for a bit to give Mrs. Weasley time to prepare dinner but that really only caused it to shift to the table in the kitchen. Harry was starting to put together a picture of this amazing couple. Seemingly ordinary at a glance, they possessed great talent, immense character and will and a seemingly limitless ability to extend the boundaries of what a family was. He began to see some wisdom in what Eleanor had tried to tell him. He also lamented the loss of what could have been had he been placed with the Weasleys instead of the Dursleys. But he also understood the necessity of Dumbledore's actions, but it saddened him still.

"What's the matter, Harry?" Ginny had asked him.

"I was just thinking how things might have been if I could have come here instead of the Dursleys. It might have made things a little strange for us, but..." he finished with a shrug.

Dinner had improved his mood and now he was sitting back on the comfortable couch with Ginny tucked up against his side looking across at Molly and Arthur. They noticed the distant, distracted look in his eyes while he was thinking on what he had discovered this day.

"Harry?" Mrs. Weasley prompted.

"Oh, sorry, Mum. I was just thinking. This has certainly been an eye opening day for me. I do need to ask you something though and it's a little difficult to say," he said, looking down at the floor.

"Go ahead, son," Mr. Weasley said encouragingly.

"Was Eleanor right? Maybe not the intent but the result. Have I been hurting you?" he said quietly.

"Oh, Harry, how could you think that?" Mrs. Weasley said.

"Mum, please, honesty now, no trying to spare my feelings," Harry said earnestly.

Molly looked at those green eyes and took a deep breath.

"In a word, Harry, yes. It hurts me when I know there are things I could do for you but you resist or refuse because you think it's a bother and you don't want to impose. I know it comes from a good heart but it bothers me still. It also hurts when I see how unhappy you get when you've been hurt or sick and we've been helping care for you and you feel that your being a burden, as you've put it. Harry, dear, I realize you don't have a good handle on how this whole family thing works. But understand this. Being a mum, someone who takes care of her family, is not something I do, it's who I am. You have certainly been a challenge at times but I've loved every minute of it and wouldn't trade it for anything. Does that help you any?" she asked.

"What about you, Dad? How much have I managed to aggravate you over the last few years?" Harry asked.

"Well, Harry, no more than any of the others have. The central theme for you has been as your mother has just said. You think the things we try and do for you are done because we have to do them, not because we wish to do them. It's true that we have much that could be considered reasons to feel obligated to you. But that's not why we do them, Harry. We do them out of love and for the joy it brings to all of us. I hope you can see that."

"I'm trying, Dad. I really am. I guess Hermione was right about me having a thick skull," he said letting out a long breath.

"That may have been a help to you, Harry, considering how much of a beating you've taken over the years," Mrs. Weasley said with a smile. "So, young fellow me lad, has this been of any help to you or have we managed to just add to your confusion?"

"It's helped. There's a lot to digest but at least it's a start," he said with one of his lopsided grins.

"I'm glad, dear. So tell us. How are things going otherwise? You have your classes and the house to deal with," his mum replied.

They spent the next several hours discussing his preparations for his sabbatical and what they had in mind about the house. Ginny was going to make inquiries about a rental near Hogwarts and the house project would begin with finding an architect and builder. He was going to send an owl out in the morning to Gringotts asking for recommendations. By the time Harry and Ginny were saying their goodbyes and getting ready for the brief trip back to London, he was feeling much more relaxed. It wasn't until later when he was lying in bed did he realize how deftly his mum had redirected the conversation and lightened the mood of the evening. He shook his head and smiled into the darkness.

The following day a number of messages left and entered 12 Grimmauld Place. One that left was to Gringotts asking for recommendations for the architect and builder for the house. Another was to Professor McGonagall asking for some information for his course work. He received a message from Hagrid that indicated that his broom was in safe hands, which Harry surmised meant the Centaurs had found it. He also received a message from Fleur asking how he was doing and if he would like to have a visit from her and Victoire. Harry sent word back that he was fine and would love to see them. He also received word from Milligan that he would like to come out to make a report and Harry suggested the next morning.

Shortly after lunch Harry received an answer from Gringotts suggesting a firm that could provide both the architectural and construction services and if he was amenable they would arrange for representatives to meet him at a location of his choice. Harry wasn't keen on the idea of revealing the location of the London house to outsiders so he was going to ask his 'folks' if they could meet at the Burrow. Kreacher carried this message and the response was almost immediate and brief. It was 'well, of course'.

The visit from Milligan was the first and it was shortly after breakfast. He came with a folder that contained a number of photographs,

sketches and a written report on the results of the investigation into the site in the Hebrides.

“To put it briefly, Chief, there wasn’t much of anything left. When the main structure exploded it spread a lot of burning debris about but it pretty much burned down to the foundation. Anything inside was either blown to bits or consumed in the fire. That cave was pretty well burned out as well. It looked like it might have been living spaces or something but it was hard to tell. We did find one small space that the dragon missed. It was a storage area that they must have dug out of the hillside. Didn’t have much in it, some barrels of chemicals, some maintenance supplies for the building, but nothing too out of the ordinary. What we don’t know is if any of the information that led up to this was left. Files, plans, reports, and the like,” he said.

“What about the people, the wizards?” Harry asked.

“No sign of anyone whatsoever. Either the local authorities carted away anything that was left or it just blew away. Kinda windy out there. I do have it on good authority that there are some spooks from Mysteries that have gone missing. And their boss has been doing some pretty fast talking trying to convince the Minister that he had no idea what was going on and this was all unauthorized. I’m not sure the Minister believes him,” he said deadpan.

“So we still don’t know if this is going to crop up again, do we?” Harry asked.

“Not for certain, but I think it will be awhile before anyone brings it up again and in the meantime we’ll keep poking and prodding and see if they’ve kept anything down in Mysteries about it.”

“Ok, Milligan, thanks, I appreciate it. Let me know if there’s anything you need me to do,” Harry said.

“Ok, Chief. Maybe you could arrange a visit for the little miss. We’ve had some questions as to whether we’d see her with you laid up,” the Chief Investigator said.

"I'll work something out for shortly after she gets home from school," Harry replied with a small smile.

Milligan nodded and then showed himself out of the study. Later in that morning Fleur and little Victoire arrived and Harry was able to make his first payment on the deferred hugs deficit. Harry balanced on his one good leg while Fleur helped him stay stable so the two could exchange a more suitable hug, at least from Fleur's point of view. Ginny was holding on to Victoire, who was reaching out to try and hug Harry as well.

Once he was free to sit down on the couch with his leg propped up he took hold of the little girl and got a miniature version of a Fleur hug after which he propped her up against his braced leg and she once more began an intense examination of his right hand. He looked at the two women and could only shrug.

"I have no idea what she finds so interesting about my hand."

"Maybe she can sense what you can do with it, Harry," Ginny said.

Harry just gave her a look and started to tickle his niece, getting giggles and screeches in return.

"How are you feeling, Harry? About Saturday evening at dinner, I mean," Fleur asked.

"Ok, I guess, Fleur. Eleanor came here Sunday morning and we talked it through somewhat. She's coming from a pretty unpleasant place with regard to her childhood and she saw my behavior towards Mum and Dad as being insensitive. She feels very strongly about them and thinks I was putting my own feelings ahead of theirs. In a way she was right but she didn't understand the reasoning behind it. She's going to talk to them at some point to get their side of it," Harry said.

"Harry and I had a long talk with Mum and Dad yesterday. It was very informative for Harry and I think he has a better handle of things now. At least I hope he does," Ginny said.

Harry had stopped tickling Victoire and she had settled down to playing with the straps on his brace. The conversation turned to more pleasant topics, primarily the house.

"I 'ave seen the pictures and it will be a beautiful 'ome for you two and your fameely."

"More than just our family, I think," said Harry. "There's going to be room for a lot of folks."

"Just following doctor's orders, my love," Ginny said airily. "They said you need to be surrounded by family so that's what we're doing."

Fleur started to laugh and then so did Ginny. Harry had the feeling that he had been thoroughly outmaneuvered. Not that he would ever admit to anyone but the idea of the large, comfortable house was beginning to grow on him, particularly when he envisioned it with a large number of people in and around the place.

So it was on that Friday that Ginny and Harry were sitting at the kitchen table with a Mr. Trevor Basswood and a Ms. Lucille Trent, representatives of Salisbury Plains Construction, Ltd.

Mrs. Weasley had provided a very proper tea and then retired to the living room so as not to be too obvious in her observation of the proceedings.

"I must say we were quite pleased when we were contacted by Gringotts to meet with you, Mr. and Mrs. Potter. It would be quite an honor to be part of this project. But first may we extend our best wishes for a speedy recovery from your injuries," Mr. Basswood said.

"Thank you, Mr. Basswood. I appreciate it. As to the house, we have acquired the land which is not too far from here. If we can come to an agreement I'm sure you'll want to see it. We've given the design of the house a lot of thought and have some ideas we'd like to show you."

At this, the two house builders regarded each other with knowing looks which conveyed the sentiment, 'here we go again, amateurs'.

Ginny pulled the portfolio that Abigail had been using to carry and protect her drawings closer and removed the stack of renderings.

“These drawings represent what we thought we’d like for the house. These first few are the exterior views. We also have some ideas for the interior but I thought we’d start with these,” Ginny said.

She spread the pictures out so that Basswood and Trent could see the views of the front, sides and rear as well as several three quarter views. Harry was sitting back watching the reactions from their guests and it was very satisfying personally to see the look of amazement spread across their faces. Finally Ms. Trent found her voice.

“I beg your pardon but I was under the impression that you were looking for an architect. Who did these?”

“My legal ward is a very talented artist. She and Ginny came up with these,” Harry said.

“Is she working for anyone at the moment?” Mr. Basswood asked.

“She’s just finishing up her fifth year at Hogwarts,” Ginny offered.

“She’s still in school?” he replied, amazed. “I think we’d like to talk to her at some point.”

Harry just nodded and the discussion got down to details. There was very little that the builders thought needed changing, a detail here or there. Some technical details were also discussed and in the end an agreement was reached where they would take the drawings and work up plans and an estimate and return in two weeks time. This would also allow them to meet the artist. The two left with the portfolio in hand, talking to each other animatedly.

“It looks like our Abigail has some options for her future,” Ginny said.

Harry smiled and then looked back over his shoulder and said,

“What do you say, Mum. Lunch at the Cauldron? My treat.”

“My, Harry, what a wonderful idea, but I wouldn’t want to be a bother, you know.”

Harry rolled his eyes and Ginny tried hard, but ultimately in vain, to stifle a laugh. The lunch was Harry’s first public appearance since he was injured and he was greeted with great enthusiasm by Hannah Longbottom.

“Harry, oh it’s so good to see you out and about,” she said as she tried to gingerly but enthusiastically hug him. “How are you feeling? Oh, what am I saying. I can see your leg all bound up and you’re on crutches. Come and have a seat. Hello Ginny, hello Mrs. Weasley, it’s good to see you both as well.”

With great care Hannah guided them to a table out of the main stream of traffic through the pub and Harry got seated with an extra chair placed to prop up his leg. Hannah stood by the table and said,

“We all saw the press release, of course. Neville has his doubts that you were just a spectator, Harry, but of course we’d never say anything. He said if you intend to keep this up he and Professor Sprout are going to have to come up with something that will instantly repair your injuries. So, what can I get you three for lunch?”

They placed their orders and Hannah was off to the kitchen. Harry looked around and as his gaze crossed someone else’s he would smile or give a little wave. Hannah was aware by now of Harry’s prodigious appetite so she made sure that his meal was larger the usual. As Harry finished up the last bits and crumbs he looked at his wife and said,

“So, do you feel up to a turn around the Alley?”

“Do you feel up to it, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“Won’t know if I don’t try. If it gets to be too much you can always carry me home,” he said with a grin.

Ginny just shook her head and smiled back. After paying for the meal, the three left through the back of the Cauldron and entered Diagon

Alley. Harry received a number of waves and well wishes but also more than a few stares. He was used to it by now so it didn't bother him and he enjoyed being out in the warm late spring air. They stopped at Flourish & Blotts to see if anything had turned up in the search for texts for his course. He was happy to hear that a supply of the book, 'Thoughts on Magic in a Mundane World' would be available in time for next terms students.

They stopped in to see George and Mrs. Weasley stood looking about the shop, clucking her tongue in a touch of dismay, thinking that the financial fortunes of one of her children and his family were based on such silliness. Then she sighed and thought it could be worse. They also visited the increasingly pregnant Angelina at the Ice Cream Haven and the penultimate mother grilled her daughter in law on her health, was she too tired, did she have enough help and what arrangements had she made since the baby was going to arrive at the height of their busiest time. Harry and Ginny smiled and made sure that they had obtained a box full of cookies before they left.

As his convalescence progressed, Harry tried to fill his time as best he could. He was wrapping up the preparation of materials for his coming year at Hogwarts as well as reading from his growing library. Over the past year or so Flourish and Blotts had taken a proactive roll and if they or their contacts found something they thought Harry would find interesting, they would send a message with a brief description of the book and its contents and the cost to acquire. More often than not, Harry would buy it, hence Ginny's concern about having enough library space.

An area that had begun to interest Harry was how spells were created or discovered and the various theories of how things actually happened when magic was used. Some of the more mystical ideas revolved around the influence of gods or spirits or the like. He noticed these tended to come from books dating back centuries. Newer ideas centered on the manipulation of energies, which sounded something like what Eleanor had been referring to with the whole 'matter equals energy' business. One author suggested that magic was a manifestation of something called a harmonic resonance between energy in a person's body and that contained in nature. The use of a wand was a way to focus the personal energy and amplify it and that

the words spoken 'tuned' it to match the natural energy and hence perform the required feat. Harry got the distinct impression that there was a great deal of speculation out there but it did make him curious enough to want to try an experiment. His limited use of dragon fire had made him wonder if there was a way to tap into that as a human. The books indicated that the use of Latin or its derivatives seemed to provide the best 'tuning' harmonics.

On the desk in his study he had written out a few phrases and he decided to use his finger instead of his wand at first in the hopes of keeping any effect small and manageable. He set a muggle notebook propped up against the wall as a target. Sitting in his chair, he pointed his right hand with forefinger straight out at the note book and murmured 'Incendio Draco' and he felt a tingle run down his arm to his finger tip and brief little flame appeared, then vanished.

"Promising," he mumbled to himself.

He took aim once more and with a little louder voice and imaging a line of fire in his mind he repeated the phrase 'Incendio Draco' and a line of fire about two feet long jumped from his finger and splashed against the notebook, heavily singeing the cover. The smell of burnt paper drifted through the air. Harry decided that was enough experimenting in the house. He needed to be outdoors for anything more. He struggled to his feet and using the gnarled cane that he started using for short walks went and retrieved the notebook, blowing on it to get rid of any remaining hotspots. He went and sat back down and thought about where he might be able to experiment further. He was concerned that it might expend significant energy and he didn't think it wise to go off someplace alone. He also considered the irony of the wording of the phrase.

He got up and walked to the bottom of the staircase and called up to Ginny who was in Abigail's room getting it ready for her return next week. Her response was barely audible from two stories up but then became more clear as she called back down through the stairwells.

"Yes, Harry? Is everything alright?"

“Yes, love. I was just wondering if you wanted to take a trip out to the Burrow with me. I need to try something and I want to have some open space around me,” he said.

“One moment, sweetheart,” Ginny said and then Harry heard the sounds of rapid footfalls.

She appeared at top of the staircase to the main floor and Harry stepped back. She was looking at him with suspicion. With raised eyebrows she said,

“Just what are you up to this time, oh great and mighty wizard?”

“I’m not ‘up’ to anything. I’m just experimenting and thought inside the house wasn’t the best place for it,” he said, trying to look studious and innocent at the same time.

“Hmm, the fact that I can smell smoke tells me you’ve already tried and now you want to play in a bigger playground. Alright, we’ll go. If not you’ll likely try it here and burn down the whole block. Let’s go,” she said.

As they made their way to the front door Ginny was thinking that her plans to lead the quiet life of the wife of a studious academic might not be so quiet after all. She was wondering if she was going to have to add a deep dungeon level room to the new house for the mad wizard to conduct his experiments. Harry collected his crutches and they went outside onto the porch after informing Kreacher they were going out. When they arrived at the Burrow, Ginny hurried up to the kitchen door and opened it part way and yelled into the kitchen.

“Mum, are you home?”

“Ginny? Is everything alright, dear?” came her mother’s voice from inside the house.

Ginny ducked inside while Harry looked around for a place to try his experiment. He immediately ruled out the backyard as it was too close to the house and the field across the way was green with heavy spring growth but that probably wouldn’t suffice so he settled on the

roadway in front of the house. It should be wide enough and the dirt and gravel should be sufficiently fireproof.

“Harry, dear, what are you about?” Mrs. Weasley’s voice reached him from the back door.

“I just had an idea that I wanted to try out and I need some open space. Maybe you and Ginny should stay inside. I’ll be out front and you can watch from the living room.”

“I trust you know what you’re doing, young fellow,” she said a bit dubiously.

“Whatever gave you that idea, Mum?” he asked with a grin.

She treated Harry to one of her best ‘mum’ looks and went back inside. Harry swung his way along until he was standing in the middle of the road facing towards where it disappeared into the woods a fair distance away. He raised his hand and leaning on one crutch pointed down the road, envisioning the jet of flame and saying loudly, ‘Incendio Draco’. A plume of yellow-orange flame jumped from his hand and travelled nearly one hundred feet down the road before winking out. He looked at the house and saw Ginny and her mother looking at him, their eyes wide and grinned back at them.

“Time for all or nothing,” he said to himself and he pulled out his wand and again balanced himself on one crutch.

He gave the wand a swish and flick that would have had Professor Flitwick beaming and shouted as loud as he could, ‘Incendio Draco’ while envisioning a tighter flare. The results were, to say the least, impressive. The jet of plasma was a pure blinding white and stretched the entire length that the first plume of flame had traveled. When Ginny and Mrs. Weasley had rubbed their eyes to the point they could see again they spotted Harry lying on his back some feet away from where he had been standing. They ran out of the house and Ginny was the first to reach Harry’s side. He was laying there laughing to himself. Ginny snorted and then knelt down to help him sit up.

“What are you laughing about? You could have hurt yourself,” she said angrily.

“It’s ok, Ginny. I just forgot that jet engine stuff,” he said.

“What are you going on about, Harry?”

By now Mrs. Weasley had reached them and it took a moment to convince her Harry had come to no significant harm. They helped him up and retrieved his crutches for him. Ginny looked at him again and said,

“You were saying?”

“Oh, it’s what muggles use to make those big airplanes fly. The engine produces a lot of hot gas that goes out one way and the engine pushes the plane the other way. I guess that’s what happened here. The fire went that way,” he pointed, “and I went this way, most of it sliding on my bum,” he finished with a laugh.

“Hmm, well that’s all very well and good, fellow me lad, but it’s a good thing you weren’t closer to that wood. You would have sent it all up in flames. Just what good is that going to be anyway?”

Harry shrugged and then said,

“I don’t know if it will be of any good. I was just curious to see if I could do it.”

Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Potter both rolled their eyes and shook their heads and proceeded to brush the worst of the dust off Harry’s pants and shirt. Then they escorted him into the kitchen and sat him down at the table. Since it was close to lunchtime and Mrs. Weasley was sure he had used up quite a bit of energy with that last stunt, as she put it, she better see to feeding him up. Harry agreed readily. It wasn’t long after when Mr. Weasley came through the door and said,

“Well, what a nice surprise. I thought I’d come home and surprise Molly with company for lunch and I see a little party is underway.”

"I don't know that I'd call it a party, Arthur," Molly said. "Harry here wanted to conduct an experiment," and she proceeded to tell her husband what had transpired.

By the time she was done, Mr. Weasley was sitting across from Harry with eyes wide.

"I'm certainly glad you decided not to try it at home, Harry, but are you sure that's the sort of thing you should be messing about with?"

"I'm trying to be careful, Dad," Harry said seriously.

Mr. Weasley got up and went to look out the front window and he stared at the road for a moment and then went to the front door.

"I'll be back in a moment," he said as he went outside.

Mrs. Weasley stood by the edge of the kitchen and she could see her husband walk out to the road and look down along the direction towards the woods. Then he walked down the road a bit and she could see him looking down at his feet. He crouched down and looked closely at the ground. He then stood up and walked back to the house and then came in through the front door. He had an odd expression on his face as he returned to his place at the table.

"Harry, I think you should be very careful where and when you choose to use that particular spell, if that's what it is. Do you realize that there is a substantial stretch of the road out front with a section running down the middle that is essential dirty glass?"

"Um, no, sir. I didn't get a chance to look at it afterwards. Glass, you say?" Harry said carefully.

"That's right. The sand or whatever in the road was melted and now it's a dark brown glassy substance," Mr. Weasley said, looking across at Harry.

Harry blinked a couple of times and said,

"I'm glad I didn't try it in the study then."

The Saturday of the following week at the Burrow proved to be just as exciting but much more fun with a party celebrating Abigail's sixteenth birthday. In addition, although still unofficial, everyone was expecting that Abigail would receive Exceeds or Outstanding in all her OWLs. It was a full family celebration with everyone in attendance including Teddy Lupin. Harry and Ginny had collected him from his grandmother's and he was going to spend the weekend with them. It was obvious he had remembered Abigail from the wedding because wherever she was, he was close by.

There was a tense moment when Charlie and Eleanor arrived. Charlie greeted Harry with his usual vigorous handshake and smile and then stepped away. Eleanor looked at Harry and gave a bit of a smile and then stepped forward to hug him. He returned the favor as best he could and something was whispered back and forth. While it was never revealed exactly what had been said when Eleanor had spoken to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley it was intimated that while it was agreed that Eleanor's concerns about her boyfriend's parents were appreciated her conclusions about Harry's motives were way off base and that she needed a serious lesson in family history. What conclusions she came to as a result of the lesson were never discussed openly but she would always greet him warmly and never had a bad thing to say about him again. It took Fleur a while to warm back up to Eleanor again and for a time their greetings were cool but eventually they thawed.

Other arrivals to the party included members of the Office of Magical Law Enforcement to include Aurors, a few Patrollers and Tom Medford. Abigail and Tom spent some time talking together and Harry watched them from his place on a new chaise lounge. His favorite old chair had been tucked away and no one was going to trust it to support his injured body. After a while he let his gaze drift and he made eye contact with Ginny who was watching him from nearby. She obviously found something amusing. She got up and came over to crouch down beside his chair.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked.

"You are, my love," Ginny replied with a smirk.

“What do you mean?”

“If you could only see the look on your face when you were watching Tom and Abigail talking. Your eyes all squinty even with your glasses on and your lips turned down. He’s a very nice, polite young man, Harry, and Abigail needs to have nice people around her these days,” Ginny said.

“I know he’s nice and polite. I also know he’s only a year younger than I am and that’s six years older than Abigail. That doesn’t concern you?” Harry asked.

“Not really. Abigail is an old, old, soul Harry and so far there’s nothing to suggest anything of that sort. Besides, Bill is seven years older than Fleur and I think that’s been working out fairly well, don’t you think?” Ginny asked.

Harry looked over to where Fleur was sitting with Victoire on her lap, Bill sitting besides her. The young Ted was standing in front of them looking at the toddler with intense curiosity.

As if feeling his eyes on her, Fleur looked up and over at Harry with a smile but a question in her blue eyes. He smiled back and looked over at Ginny.

“Yes, it has, but I guess I’m being forced to deal with issues I’m not quite ready for. I guess it’s making me a little edgy.”

“Sweetheart, you aren’t dealing with them by yourself. I’m right here with you. And take a look around,” Ginny said and gestured with her hand.

Harry did and he saw something that he hadn’t seen before because he was focused on just the two younger people. Mrs. Weasley was watching Abigail and Tom with eagle eyes. He also saw that a pair of Aurors that worked on Milligan’s team had drifted to within hearing distance of the two young people and were paying close attention. Lastly, Milligan himself had sat down in a chair that had a clear line of

sight to the two. Harry looked back at Ginny and gave her a crooked half smile.

"I guess I'm not the only one concerned then."

"I think that's a very good observation, sweetheart. I think you can relax a little bit."

When it came time for the presents, Abigail was quite overwhelmed. From Ginny and Harry she received some new robes that were quite stylish and gave her a more grownup look. Harry wondered, all things considered, if that was such a good idea. Ron and Hermione gave her a nice leather school bag. Numerous art supplies were in evidence and something that really gave Harry a start was a very nice make up set from Fleur and Bill with a promise of lessons on how to apply it from Fleur. Abigail was thrilled, the ladies quite pleased and Harry was appalled. Ginny just smiled at him and gave his arm a squeeze.

A very fine cake was provided by Mrs. Weasley, although not without some serious discussion with Angelina who had wanted to provide it. She was able to provide the ice cream that went alongside, however, and the combination was greatly appreciated by all, especially Harry. Another highlight of the afternoon was when Harry had a chance to talk to Ron. He had something to tell Harry that had him smiling from ear to ear.

"I had a trip up to Hogwarts a week or so ago, Harry."

"Were they still playing club matches?"

"No, but you're close. They had a little award ceremony to recognize the top three teams and also some individual awards like top scorer, most saves, that sort of thing. Someone must have let it out that I was the one that came up with the idea for the club matches because they asked me to give out the awards," he said.

"That's terrific, Ron. So I guess the program is a success and they'll carry on for the coming term."

“That’s right. It was really cool. Afterwards a lot of ‘em came up to me to say how much fun it had been and they were all really glad for the chance to play in regular competition.”

“Well done you, mate. I told you it was important that you take part in the camp.”

Ron just smiled and Harry clapped him on the shoulder. By sunset the party was winding down and guests were Disapparating home. Harry and Ginny, along with Teddy and Abigail were going to stay at the Burrow overnight. They all wound up in the living room and Abigail was keeping Ted busy by playing a game of gobstones. This particular set was intended for young players and instead of the nasty smelling liquid usually spit out, this set just spit water. Ted found it immensely entertaining.

Ted began to fade around nine and Mrs. Weasley took him up to his room and Abigail came up to sit on the couch with Harry and Ginny. She let out a big sigh and leaned her head against Ginny’s shoulder. Harry looked around his wife and said,

“Big day, eh, little one?”

“Yes, and it was a very nice party, thank you very much,” she said but her light voice sounded wistful.

“What’s the matter, Abigail?” Ginny asked.

“Oh, I’m just being silly I suppose but I don’t really like the idea of getting older,” she said.

“Well, I don’t see that you have a choice, Abigail,” Ginny replied.
“None of us do.”

“I know, but the more I grow up, the more I catch you two up. Even though we’ll always be the same number of years apart, soon I’ll be an adult too and it will be harder to think of you as my parents,” she said as she looked up at Ginny and then at Harry. “I do think of you that way, you know, just like you consider the Weasleys yours, Harry. I’ll miss how that feels, I think.”

Abigail leaned back into Ginny's shoulder with a sigh. Ginny looked back at her husband and then she put her arm around the girl's shoulder and pulled her close. Harry didn't know what to say but Ginny tried.

"I understand what you're saying, sweetheart, but whatever the years may bring I want you to know that we will always love you and consider you as a member of our family. And I wouldn't worry too much about it. If today was any indication, Harry will always behave very much like a father where you are concerned," she said and then leaned down to whisper in Abigail's ear.

When Ginny was done Abigail sat up and looked around at Harry, her eyes wide and her face red. Then she began to giggle and tried to stifle them with her hands but it was to no avail. Harry scowled at his wife who just looked back at him with a very knowing expression. Mr. Weasley, that paragon of wisdom, wisely chose not to notice the whole exchange.

The next week brought two interesting interruptions into Harry's studious routine. The first was a visit from Kingsley Shacklebolt. He arrived around mid morning and Kreacher let him in and escorted him to Harry's study. Ginny had agreed to take Abigail to the Ministry to meet with some of the friends that hadn't been able to make it to the party.

"Master Harry, the Minister of Magic has arrived," Kreacher said from the doorway.

"Thank you, Kreacher, please show him in," Harry said.

"Hello, Harry," rumbled the Minister. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm doing pretty well, sir. Leg's not much use, but at least it's not too painful. I'm getting plenty of time to do my last minute preparations for the coming term. How are things at the Ministry?"

"Not all that well, in fact. The idea that a group of rouge wizards conducting this kind of experiment right under my nose hasn't done

much for my credibility. The fact that you were involved in the conclusion has helped but..." Shacklebolt shrugged. "I won't suggest we are back where we were when Voldemort fell but it's a set back. Some of the old family types are calling for changes, or changes back, I should say."

Harry nodded and then said,

"Have you been told about our tracking of Lucius Malfoy's activities? It seems that he's been spending a lot of time visiting some of those you've been mentioning."

"Grimsson has mentioned something to that effect. I believe you thought he might have had something to do with the dragon business."

"I still do. I think he's the one through which the creators of the first hybrid got access to the old farm and how the information got to the spooks for the second. Somewhere, some when, I think there is still going to be a reckoning with Mr. Malfoy," Harry said quietly.

The Minister simply nodded, then said,

"So, Harry, you're set for your sabbatical? There's quite a bit of wagering going on that you won't be coming back to us," the Minister said seriously.

"I guess that's a possibility, but I haven't made any decisions. You know I'd tell you if I did."

"Yes, I know you would. Which reminds me, I've been asked to find out when you're leaving for Hogwarts. They'd like to send you off with a little gathering. Nothing extravagant, but like I said, they think you might not be coming back and they want to do something for you."

It was an indication that Harry was taking the lessons learned recently seriously as he did not try to beg off on the farewell. He looked at the Minister's expression and said,

“I was planning on going up the week before so I could get things ready so I guess the week before that?”

“Excellent. I’ll pass that on.”

The Minister left shortly after and Harry wondered what was fueling the speculation of his leaving the Ministry for good. Maybe they thought he just couldn’t take the beatings anymore. He wasn’t so sure he could either. The next interruption came later in the week when the two representatives from the builders came back for their second meeting. As before it was held at the Burrow. This time Abigail was there.

Basswood and Trent had arrived with an easel and a large portfolio and a small leather briefcase. The easel was set up in front of the fireplace and a series of large renderings were placed on it. Harry, Ginny, Mrs. Weasley and Abigail were sitting on the couches and Mr. Basswood was making the presentation.

“Mr. and Mrs. Potter, as you will see there isn’t a great deal of difference in what you showed us two weeks ago and what we are going to show you today. Essentially we’ve taken your ideas, made sure that they comply with current standards and practices and made a few suggested changes that might make the your home more comfortable,” he said and then turned his attention to Abigail. “I must say, young lady, that we were all very impressed with your artwork. I understand that you’ve had no formal training, is that correct?”

Abigail merely nodded. Mr. Basswood continued.

“Well, I must say that you’ve a great future ahead of you if you so choose. I know Ms. Trent would like to speak to you before we leave.”

Abigail looked over at the witch and nodded with a shy smile.

Mr. Basswood smiled and nodded and then pulled a blank placard away to reveal the first view of the proposed house. In truth it did look very much like the renderings Abigail had done, only larger and with a bit more definition and detail. They were taken through each view and the features explained, then the floor plans where shown and

here was where most of the suggestions were made. The kitchen looked larger and had more cabinets than the original.

“We’ve found that in many instances, homeowners tend to regret not making their kitchens larger.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded sagely at this comment. It also appeared that more room had been allocated to the library. Harry looked at Ginny and said,

“Did you suggest that when I wasn’t looking, Gin?”

“No, Harry, not that I’d argue with it,” she replied.

“No, Mr. Potter, but we did some research and we discovered that you’ve been doing lectures at Hogwarts and you’ll be spending this next term teaching there. It occurred to us that someone of such academic interests could do with more space in this area. All of us at the company have been through Hogwarts of course and many of us have children there now or will have in the future so we have our own interests at stake, so to speak,” he said with a slightly sheepish grin.

Harry simply nodded and gestured for the man to continue. They covered all the bedrooms to include a master suite on the first floor as an option that would alter the layout of the house somewhat but Ms. Trent went on to explain.

“We mean no ill luck to you, Mr. Potter, but considering the injuries you’ve suffered it was thought that minimizing the need to climb stairs might be something to consider.”

Harry leaned back into the couch, his left leg propped up on the cushions. He looked at Ginny and then Abigail. Ginny was the first to speak.

“It makes a certain amount of sense, Harry. We don’t know how long you’ll be rehabilitating your knee or how complete the healing will be. Plus as we get older it might not be a bad thing for both of us,” she said with a small smile. “We probably should have thought of it ourselves, eh, Abigail?”

Abigail gave a small, sad, smile. Harry looked back at the builders.

"You've priced out both options?" he asked.

"It all comes out about the same, Mr. Potter," Mr. Basswood said.

"Alright. Why don't you give us a bit of time to consider it and then we can send you a message with our decision. I really like what you've come up with; I just want some time to consider which way to go."

"Very good, sir. We'll leave the renderings so you can use them to help you decide. We look forward to hearing from you," Mr. Basswood said. "Now, I need to get back to the office, but with your approval Ms. Trent wished to speak with Miss Westwood."

"That'll be fine," Harry said, extending his hand from the couch. "Abigail and Ms. Trent can use the table in the kitchen to talk."

Mr. Basswood left and Ms. Trent and Abigail moved to the far end of the kitchen table. Harry remained on the couch and Ginny and Mrs. Weasley moved up to take a closer look at the artwork for the house. They spoke for a few minutes and then looked back at Harry who was looking at but not really seeing the drawings. Ginny stepped closer and asked,

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"I was just thinking. What they said about having our room on the first floor. When the Minister was to the house the other day he mentioned that they're laying odds on my not ever coming back to the Ministry. I was wondering if others can see my future more clearly than I can. That it's that obvious but I can't, or won't, see it," he said looking at her with those deep green eyes, looking sad and a little lost.

She reached down and took his hand and gave it a squeeze. Then she said,

“It’s your future, my love, and what others think is obvious, isn’t. Not until you’ve been able to work through it and make your choice. But whatever choice you make, I’m there with you.”

Harry's Future, Part 34

Harry sat with Ginny at a table set aside for part of the Weasley clan. The reception for Percy and Audrey was starting to wind down. It had been a pleasant affair held at a small hall that Audrey's parents had arranged for. Harry's leg had precluded any attempt at dancing so he was forced to watch from the sidelines but other than that it had been an enjoyable day. He could see the newlywed couple making the rounds of the tables while Ginny and Fluer had their heads close, chatting mostly about what other people were wearing.

Harry had been receiving a number of visits to the table from various well wishers who hadn't seen him since his injury. Many of the comments for a fast recovery contained varying degrees of suggestions that maybe it was time for a career change. Harry accepted them with good grace but it was starting to wear on him a bit. As he was watching the newlyweds he noticed Percy whisper to his new wife and then make a straight line for Harry. Percy pulled up a vacant chair and sat down next Harry, his expression that of any typical new husband.

"Harry, I don't know how you managed it all with that big wedding you had. If I have to shake one more hand, I think my arm is going to come off."

"Yeah, you do get numb after a while, don't you?" Harry replied with a smile.

"There is something I need to talk to you about though and I figure I'm in safe territory at this table. It's about the dragon business," Percy said looking uncomfortable.

"What's the problem, Perc?"

"I haven't told Audrey about you yet. I just never got around to it after we got engaged and now if I do I'm afraid she's going to be upset that I was holding it to myself."

"Hmm, yeah, I can see where that might cause some problems. I'll tell you what. If we can manage some time tonight or in the very near future I'll tell her and I'll take the blame for not letting you tell her yet."

"Are you sure you want to do that? Especially after all the grief you took from Eleanor," Percy said with some dismay.

"It's not really the same thing, plus I think I can explain it away easier than you could. I'll take care of it, don't worry," Harry said with a smile.

"Thanks, Harry. I'm sorry to drop this on you, but this is a bit outside the newlywed experience for revealing family secrets," Percy said, his expression a mix of relief and humor.

So it was as the reception wound to a close Percy and Audrey came over to sit with Harry, Ginny, Fleur, Bill, Eleanor and Charlie. After some cursory comments about with a great day it had been and what plans did the new couple have for the honeymoon and living accommodations, Harry coughed a bit and then looked at his new sister-in-law.

"Audrey, now that you are an official member of the Weasley clan, it's time you were brought into a select group of secret keepers," Harry said in his quiet, serious voice.

"Alright. What is it? A mad uncle in the attic?" she asked.

"No, although that might be something your kids have to look forward to. It involves me. You see, Audrey, I'm an unregistered animagus."

"Really, Harry? Isn't it against the law to be unregistered? Kind of an odd spot for you considering your job," she said, obviously surprised.

"Yes, it is. But the Minister is aware of it and feels the need for secrecy and me staying on the job outweighed the legal questions. But that's not all. The animal I become is something unusual."

"Ok. Well, I'm listening," she said.

"I become a rather large, dark green dragon," Harry said.

He watched as her eyebrows climbed up nearly to be lost in her short bangs. Her eyes were wide and it appeared she wanted to say something but nothing came out. She looked around at those sitting at the table and they all nodded. She came back to Harry and finally managed to speak.

“You mean to tell me that one of my new brothers-in-law can become a dragon at will. What? Flying, fire breathing all that? How long have you known?” she asked.

“It happened when I took that trip to Europe during my confrontation with that wizard.”

Harry went on to explain what had happened, all the destruction he caused and his subsequent discussions with Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore as well as his practice sessions.

“So does that mean that that whole business at Hogwarts with the two dragons, it was really you that came and killed the first one?” she asked, incredulously.

“Yes. My being a spectator was a cover story to hide my secret. I got hurt as the dragon. It seems that sort of thing carries through the change,” Harry replied.

She turned to her new husband and said in a very wifely tone,

“And you waited until now to tell me?”

As Percy turned red and started to speak Harry broke in.

“That’s my doing, Audrey. When this all first happened I told the family about it but I swore them to secrecy and I would decide when you and Eleanor could be told, since I really didn’t know either of you very well. El found out by accident the day after Christmas but I waited until tonight to tell you. Please don’t blame Percy for holding back on you.”

Audrey's eyes tightened as she looked at Harry, his bright green eyes fixed on her. Then they relaxed as she sat back in her chair and blew out a long breath. She let her gaze travel around the table.

"Am I correct in thinking that you all have seen this happen?" she asked.

They all nodded but Charlie spoke first.

"Yes, we have. When Harry first arrived back from his trip to the continent he had already changed back by the time we had gotten out to see him. Little Abigail was first to meet him but she didn't say anything about what she saw. A couple of days later he gave us all a demonstration. El saw it the day after last Christmas. Harry was posing for Abigail and Ginny sent me word and I was so excited I didn't think about it and just had Eleanor come along and..." he shrugged in conclusion.

"I'm not so sure I wouldn't have preferred the uncle in the attic," Audrey said. "Well, you don't need to worry about your secret. Besides, I doubt anyone would believe me if I did say anything."

"That's what I said," Eleanor offered.

Audrey took a look around the hall and then said quietly,

"You weren't thinking of any demonstrations tonight were you?"

"Um, no, I've never been much for public appearances," Harry said with a smirk.

"Besides," Charlie added as he looked around. "I don't honestly think he'd fit."

Audrey let her gaze wonder around the hall, taking in its length and the height of the ceiling. Then she looked at Harry and simply said,

"My word."

Harry just nodded and then said,

“So, that’s about it. Like I said, it was my idea to keep it in the family so to speak, so welcome to the family, Audrey.”

The next morning Harry and Ginny were sitting at the kitchen table in the London house having a second cup of tea after breakfast.

“That was a really nice wedding, wasn’t it, Harry?” Ginny asked

“I thought so. As much as I enjoyed ours, there’s something to be said for just fun and uneventful,” he replied with a wry smile.

“What you were telling Audrey though, wasn’t exactly true was it? I mean you originally gave Charlie and Percy the discretion to decide when to let El and Audrey in on the secret.”

“Well, Percy was kind of in a tight spot. He was afraid that if she found out he hadn’t gotten around to telling her it would have caused trouble. You saw the way she reacted at first. So, I figured it would be better for me to take the blame for keeping it from her until they were married,” he said, suppressing his shrug.

Ginny just looked at him and shook her head. Then Harry changed the subject as he often did at times like this.

“So, when will construction start on the house?” he asked.

“They said it would be until the end of July before the detailed plans are finished and then they can start work. Mr. Basswood thinks it will be sometime in the spring before it’s done. The first big deadline is to have the structure up and the exterior sealed he called it before the weather gets bad and then they can do the interior work.”

“Sounds good. If I haven’t said it before, I want to thank you for taking control of this whole business. It makes everything else I’m doing that much easier,” Harry said.

“That’s why I’m here, Harry. Well, one of the reasons. To help make things easier for you. Plus it makes me feel like I’m making a major contribution to our future,” she said with a small smile.

Harry reached across and took a hand in his, locked her brown eyes with his green and said,

“You are my future,” with a heavy emphasis on the ‘are’.

Her smile got much wider. The next big event after the wedding was the annual return of Hogwarts students. Harry insisted on being on the platform, crutches or no, so at the appointed hour he and Ginny stood amongst the other expectant magical parents waiting for Abigail to return. Her brief appearance for her birthday did little to ease how much they both missed her. Some of the parents had stopped to offer Harry wishes for his speedy recovery and thanks for responding to the emergency but more than a few stood off and tried not to make a show of watching him. Ginny just shook her head and Harry shrugged, and this time Ginny let it go. Soon the chuffing of the steam locomotive let everyone know the Express was arriving. As the train rolled to a stop Harry straightened up on his crutches and tried to figure where the fifth years were going to spill out onto the platform.

What happened next was unexpected. As students began to disgorge from the train a shout went up and they all began to move towards Harry. They formed a quickly growing ring around him and there were many shouted greetings, well wishes and thanks for his actions that terrible night. Several porters made their way towards the crowd to try and get things under control. Harry did his best to acknowledge the students and in some cases accept what appeared to be cards and small tokens that were offered. Finally, an older male student, most likely the past year’s Head Boy shouted out over the crowd, bolstered by the ‘Sonorous’ spell, directions for the students to disperse and please allow Professor Potter some room to breathe.

They did so, although reluctantly, and with many ‘see you in the fall’, the crowd melted away, leaving a slightly stunned Professor-to-be and his wife standing with their hands full of parchment and small items. A small figure stood just at the edge of the platform looking at her surrogate parents with a wistful smile. When eye contact was finally made her smile widened and she dashed up to the two and began hugging them as best as circumstances would allow. Abigail

then began to take hold of the notes and presents and put them in a shoulder bag she had been carrying, almost as if she knew what to expect. A porter pushed a trolley with Abigail's trunk and owl cage up to the three and said,

"Here you are, folks. Thought you might like to have this," he said and with a smile and tip of his cap he walked off.

"That was really something wasn't it, Harry?" Abigail asked.

"Yes, it was. Very unexpected, but you seemed to have come prepared, little one," Harry said quietly.

"Inside information, Harry. Ever since the word got out that you were hurt as part of the rescue from that hybrid thing practically everyone was talking about how they should do something for you and so on. This is what they came up with," Abigail said.

"How did they know I'd be here, bad leg and all?" Harry said, with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

"I guess a little owl must have told them," the little witch replied with her impish grin. "Come on, I can't wait to get home."

Harry smiled and with Ginny pushing the trolley they went through the barrier wall and then outside where a Ministry car awaited them. The driver wrestled the trunk into the boot and then they all piled into the car for the short drive to the Black house. Ginny helped the driver get the trunk up to the top of the steps and then Kreacher opened the door and levitated the trunk inside, all the while Harry stood by muttering under his breath something about being 'bloody useless'. Ginny gave him a squeeze and then let him precede her into the house. Harry went into his study while Ginny and Abigail followed Kreacher as he floated the heavy trunk up the stairs to Abigail's room where the contents would be removed and sorted. After a short while Ginny came back down with Abigail's bag in hand and walked into the study and sat down at the desk. She emptied the contents onto the desk and began sorting out 'cards' from presents. Most of the messages were on parchment although it looked like some of the muggle born students had acquired actual get well cards. She began

handing them to Harry and as he read he noticed that a number of them contained what appeared to be very familiar artwork.

“Did you look at these, Gin?” Harry asked.

“Not until just now. Why, sweetheart?”

“Some of the artwork on these parchment messages looks awfully familiar,” he said as he showed her some examples.

“Hmm, you’re right, Harry. It does.”

They looked at more of the messages and some of the little gifts that had been pressed on them. After a little while they heard the sound of someone rapidly descending the stairs and Abigail appeared in the doorway.

“So what do you think, Harry?” she asked as she entered.

“I think it was very nice of them to take the time and effort to do this for me. I noticed that some of the parchment messages have some very nice art work on them,” he said, eyebrows raised.

“Oh, that,” she said with a giggle. “When some of the muggle born students showed the cards they had gotten from home and how nice they looked, the ones from magic families tried to find ways to make the ones they were doing on parchment look better. A friend of mine asked me to draw something on hers and it kind of got around so I wound up doing a fair number of them. Made more than a handful of sickles out of it, too,” she said with a grin.

“You charged them for it?” Ginny said, sounding surprised.

“Of course. It’s one thing to do it for a friend but I had people from other houses asking me. I read somewhere that talent shouldn’t be given away for free, otherwise people won’t value it,” she said seriously.

Harry looked at Ginny, who said,

“Looks like our girl will do alright for herself, Harry.”

“Looks that way. I wonder how big the bill will be for her work on the house drawings,” he replied deadpanned.

“Harry,” she started indignantly, “I wouldn’t charge you for something...” she tailed off as she saw Harry trying to suppress a grin.

“Oh, that was a dirty trick,” she said but chose not to retaliate physically due to Harry’s bad leg.

“Anyway, these are all great and I’ll have to make sure I find a way to thank them when I get up there,” he said.

“You know it’s funny, Harry, but a lot of people were talking about how they didn’t really think you were just a spectator. They think that after what happened to you the first time you dealt with a mad dragon that you figured out a way to call one if you needed it. In a way it’s kind of true but they think you were the one that really made it happen,” Abigail said.

“Hmm, seems I’m developing a reputation that I can’t live up to.”

“Not true, Harry,” Ginny said, “just not in the way they think.”

The conversation was interrupted by Kreacher’s call to dinner and with help from his two ‘ladies’ Harry was on his feet, or foot as the case may be, and they made their way to the table. As they ate Harry looked at his ward and asked,

“So besides making a small fortune in the get well card business, what else were you up to? Any more work on your magical creatures drawings?”

“Oh sure, I think I’ve drawn just about everything that Hagrid could find, not to mention you,” she said with a grin. “I’ve got enough to fill a book.”

Harry looked over at Ginny and said,

“A book she says.”

“Yes, that’s what she said, Harry. What are you thinking?”

“Just that with all the drawings that Abigail has put together and Hagrid’s knowledge of magical creatures you could put together a pretty impressive book on the subject,” Harry said.

Ginny started to laugh a bit and said,

“Harry, I appreciate that you think very highly of Hagrid, so do I. But I don’t really see a book full of ‘yas’ and ‘tas’ and ‘summats’ attracting much of an audience.”

Harry gave his wife a serious look and said,

“That’s how he talks, Ginny, not how he writes. I’ve seen his notes and that’s not what comes through. Plus, I was thinking that a certain budding writer of my acquaintance might find some time to help assemble and edit such a volume. But it was just an idea. Don’t feel you need to take it seriously,” Harry said as he went back to his meal.

Abigail sat very still, looking back and forth between Harry and Ginny. She thought it was a brilliant idea but she was afraid to say anything. Ginny looked over at her with a squint and said,

“What do you think, Abigail?”

“I think it’s a great idea. I’d love to do the illustrations and Harry’s right. Hagrid knows so much about magical creatures. He would tell me all kinds of interesting things about them while I was doing my sketches. With you helping with the writing it would be really something.”

Ginny nodded and then looked over at her husband, her squint more pronounced.

“This isn’t some sort of trick to get me away from writing about you, is it Harry?” she asked suspiciously.

“Love, I learned a long time ago that I couldn’t change your mind about anything if you were really serious about it. I just thought it would be a great way to preserve a pretty extensive source of knowledge and give Abigail a good project that would help firm up her reputation as an artist,” Harry said seriously.

“Hmm, well let me give it some thought,” Ginny said.

Harry looked over at Abigail and gave her one of his ‘dragon’ winks which sent her into a fit of laughter. Ginny chose to ignore the exchange. Once Abigail had gotten control of herself again Harry looked at her more seriously and said,

“You know, little one, I was thinking about something the other day. Has our taking you out of school for those little visits, you know, your birthday and the meeting with the builders, been causing you any trouble? Anybody giving you a hard time about it?”

“No, not really, Harry. A couple of comments were made but when I explained it was part of your therapy no one said anything anymore,” she said with a straight face.

“My therapy?” he asked.

“Yup, I told them that the healers said that the better mood you were in the quicker you would recover from your injuries and having me around put you in a much better mood,” Abigail replied with her signature smile.

Ginny’s eyes were wide but Harry’s had narrowed behind his glasses.

“You know, I think someone has been spending just a little too much time with a bunch of Aurors. They are having a bad influence on you and you are developing a very devious mind, young lady.”

Abigail’s eyes got very wide and began to mist up and her lower lip began to quiver. She said in a barely audible voice,

“Oh, Harry, what a thing to say. Don’t you love me any more?”

Harry almost instinctively began to apologize but a dry, cold voice in the back of his mind suggested he not do so. After a moment the little witch's eyes brightened and she started to laugh. Harry looked over at his wife and said,

"No more unsupervised visits with Fleur and I mean it."

The dust had barely settled in the Black house from the arrival of Abigail when things got exciting again. Word arrived that Angelina had gone into labor overnight and that Mrs. Weasley was already there along with a midwife. It was particularly difficult for Harry because he wanted to pace but the braced leg and crutches made it very impractical. Angelina was second only to Fleur in her outward demonstration of concern for Harry's well being and he had come to care for his 'unofficially adopted sister-in-law', as she once put it, very dearly. Ginny did her best to try and keep him calm but it proved to be a bit of trying day for them all.

Finally word arrived shortly after sunset that Angelina had delivered a healthy baby boy, Fred, and mother and son were doing fine. A true sign of Harry's concern was the fact that he had barely eaten all day and once the tension had passed Kreacher was hard put to keep up with him. A message from George arrived shortly after they finished their meal that relayed a preemptory order from Angelina that the three of them were expected the next day for a visit, no excuses.

It was slightly past noon when Harry made his way up the outer staircase to the second floor apartment above the Ice Cream Haven with Ginny and Abigail following behind. A single knock and George was there, looking slightly disheveled but grinning from ear to ear.

"Hey, I was wondering when you three were going to get here, come on in. The baby is asleep but Angelina is wide awake," the new father said.

Harry tried to keep the clumping of the crutches to a minimum as he entered the apartment. Once they were all in George led them to the bedroom in the back that he shared with his wife and now little Fred. As Harry peeked around the door frame he saw Angelina sitting up, supported by pillows, looking back at him with a contented smile.

“Get in here, you,” she said quietly so as not to disturb her son.

Harry smiled and slowly made his way to the bedside. Not being able to bend his leg presented a major obstacle to giving and receiving the hug he knew was coming. Angelina looked up at him with a funny half smile and then patted the bed next to her and said,

“Just sit yourself right down here, brother mine.”

Harry handed his crutches to George and then gingerly sat down on the bed with his bad leg resting besides Angelina. He was then able to lean over and exchange a tight, emotional embrace. When they pulled apart they were both misty eyed and smiling.

“So how’s the new mum?” he asked.

“She’s doing great, Harry. Tired but very happy,” she replied.

Ginny and Abigail came around to exchange hugs from the other side of the bed. Then they went and looked at the sleeping infant in his crib.

“Oh, Angelina, he’s beautiful,” Ginny said, barely above a whisper.

“Don’t you mean handsome, Gin? He is a boy,” Harry said.

“No, all babies are beautiful. Boys don’t become handsome for a couple of years yet,” she said with a grin.

Abigail was looking down at the boy and then she turned to his mother and said,

“Let me know when you want me to come over and I’ll do a sketch like I did from Fleur and Victoire.”

“Thank you, sweetie. Sometime next week would be good, I think,” she replied.

Abigail smiled and then she looked over at George.

“How are you feeling, Dad?” she said with that impish grin.

“The new father is doing quite well. That will likely change in the future with lack of sleep but for right now I’m doing great.”

The visitors remained for around half an hour and then left once it looked like the mother needed some rest. They returned home and Harry and Ginny wound up in the study while Abigail went upstairs to work on a project. Harry looked up from the book he was reading and noticed that Ginny was staring off into space with a rather wistful look on her face.

“What are you thinking about, love?” Harry asked.

“Hmm, oh, I guess I was just picturing how cute little Fred looked and how happy Angelina is,” she said.

“And thinking how you’d like to be a mother and how my being banged around is keeping that from happening?” he asked.

“Oh, Harry, sweetheart, don’t say it like that,” she said as she stood up and came over to kneel by his side. “I’ll admit I’d like to add to our family but we have time and it’s not like you’re going to be like this forever.”

Harry took her hand and guided her around his bad leg so she could sit on the half lap formed by his good one and he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight for a while. Then he let her move back enough so they could look eye to eye.

“Well, my love, I think it’s about time and don’t worry about this,” he said, indicating his left leg. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Something else that Ginny had been giving some thought to was starting to bear some fruit. Despite her initial misgivings when Harry had first broached the subject, she was finding the idea of collaborating on a book on Magical Creatures with Abigail and Hagrid more and more interesting. She had sent an owl to Hagrid asking what his thoughts on the topic were and she was anxiously

awaiting a response. The use of the owl had also prompted another idea and she contacted the builders about including a small owlry in the plans for the new home.

Shortly before Harry's birthday she received a fairly lengthy reply from Hagrid. First he apologized for taking so long but he had been on a short vacation and had gotten the message just a few days before. Secondly he was very surprised that someone thought he knew enough about anything that would be worth putting in a book, but when he considered it for a while he realized that he did know quite a bit about magical creatures after all.

He had mentioned it to Professor McGonagall and she thought it was a very intriguing idea and she rather liked the idea of a Hogwarts faculty member authoring a book. She suggested that perhaps Charlie Weasley could be convinced to add his expertise to the section on dragons. Hagrid closed by inviting Ginny up to the school to discuss it more if she'd like. Ginny showed the message to Harry.

"What did I tell you, Ginny, and aside from the handwriting it's a pretty well written message," he said with a grin.

Her next step was to send a message to Charlie, care of Eleanor, to get his view of the project. A rather quick response in the affirmative and a suggestion for a dinner meeting resulted in an interesting evening. Harry, Ginny, Eleanor, Charlie and Abigail were sitting around the dining room table after finishing another flawless meal. As was now usual, Harry had left little that could be considered leftovers. Eleanor was looking at him with something akin to awe.

"Even with so little activity you're able to eat that much and not put on any weight, Harry?"

"Apparently so. I don't know where it all goes but..." he concluded with a shrug.

"The Hogwarts house elves are going to have a tough time keeping up with you, Harry," Charlie said with a grin. "But what do you say we discuss the topic at hand. I thought it was a great idea, Ginny. With all the research I've been doing I was thinking about something more

than just a dry old report that the Ministry would probably just file away somewhere, but including it in a book on Magical Creatures would be really great. And with Abigail doing the illustrations I bet it would be very popular,” he finished with a grin.

Abigail looked at the one she considered her favorite amongst the Weasley brothers, if only by a little bit, and asked,

“Charlie, do you think that the information you have would be enough to fill a book all by itself?”

“It’s possible, Abigail. It’s been a lot of years since I started so it might be. Why do you ask?” he replied.

“Well, I was just thinking that if a book on magical creatures just had a section on dragons you would only be able to go so far with how much information you could put in. If you have a lot more information maybe you should consider writing your own book, maybe with Ginny’s help and I’d be happy to illustrate for you. Maybe we use the first book as practice and help you get organized for your own,” she said thoughtfully.

Harry sat back with a little smile as he watched his family discuss the ideas. Obviously Charlie found the idea of his own book intriguing. Eleanor certainly found it exciting. Ginny looked a little dubious, however.

“What’s the matter, love?” Harry said.

“I’m just wondering if I’d have enough time to work with all that. There’s the house and all. This would be three writing projects.”

“Not really, love. The journal has no time limit so there’s no real hurry there. You work together on the magical creatures book and then you’ve already had a start on the dragon book and I’d bet Charlie wouldn’t need nearly as much help writing as Hagrid would.”

“Um, don’t make any bets on that Harry,” Eleanor broke in. “You haven’t seen some of the messages that Charlie has sent to me. He

may be a champion when it comes to dragons and broomsticks but the quill is not his friend,” she finished with a fond smile.

“A bit of an exaggeration but not all that far off the mark,” Charlie added. “But you’re right Harry, it would be sequential, not everything at once.”

“You might be right at that. Well, first things first. I need to go pay a visit to Hagrid. Could you come along, Charlie?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“How about you, Harry?” she asked.

“Not a bad idea. Maybe I could arrange to get my broom back from the Centaurs. I’m sure they’d like to be free of it,” he said.

“Ok, I’ll draft a message asking when it would be convenient for Hagrid and then ask Mum if she wouldn’t mind a day with Abigail,” Ginny said.

“It’s not like I need a baby sitter, Ginny,” Abigail said.

“I know that, sweetheart, but Mum got used to you being around last summer. I’m sure she misses you already.”

“Oh, I didn’t even think of that. Sure, I’ll be glad to go,” Abigail replied.

So Ginny wrote a message to Hagrid and went to send it off. Charlie got into a discussion on flying with Abigail and Eleanor sat looking at Harry, who looked back with raised eyebrows.

“So, Mr. Potter, how are you getting along?”

“Not too badly, Ms. MacManus, all things considered.”

She smiled and continued,

“You all set for the upcoming term?”

“Very close. I’ve had a lot of time to pull everything together. I need to have one last meeting with the Professors to finalize it all. I was thinking of having them come here and include dinner. A way to say thanks for all their help,” he said.

Eleanor looked at him without saying anything. Harry looked back, his expression inviting a comment or question.

“I was just thinking I’m glad we got things straightened out is all, Harry. I know that the others didn’t think very highly of me for what I said. But I guess if I hadn’t we wouldn’t have had a chance to clear the air the way we did.”

“True and it did help me get a grip on what was going on with Mum and Dad. It’s not like you were all wrong, El. We learned some things about ourselves and each other so it’s all good, I think,” Harry said with a smile. “So what about you and Charlie? You must be driving Mum crazy.”

Eleanor laughed and leaned in to whisper to Harry.

“I’m afraid we are but neither of us is in a hurry and I still want to play for the Harpies so I’m not in any rush to have children so we figure with everyone else married off and grandchildren coming along we aren’t under any real pressure. She treats me like a daughter in law anyway so it’s not really a problem.”

Harry laughed quietly then looked over and saw the intense conversation taking place at the other end of the table now that Ginny had returned. He looked back at Eleanor and said,

“Fancy a cuppa and a game of wizards chess?”

“That would be lovely, Harry. I didn’t realize you had a set,” Eleanor replied.

“Yeah, we found it last year. It was up in the attic. It’s pretty old and kind of fancy but a board’s a board. Hang on a minute. Kreacher, can I see you, please?”

In less than a moment the little house elf came in.

"How may Kreacher be of service, Master Harry?"

"Kreacher would you please bring down the wizard's chess set so Eleanor and I can play? And then could you bring in some tea for everyone?"

"Of course, Master Harry. Kreacher will return in a moment," and then he popped out of site.

"You know, Harry, I think you're the first person I've ever known that actually asks a house elf to do something."

Harry just shrugged and any comment was cut off when Kreacher returned with his burden floating in front of him. When Harry said it was fancy he wasn't kidding. The board was actually a small pedestal table of dark, polished wood, the playing surface at least two feet on a side. The surface itself was made of alternating squares of light and dark marble separated by strips of brass. The perimeter was made of the same dark wood as the pedestal. The playing pieces were magnificent figures done up in hand painted pewter with lifelike embellishments such as swords, shields, capes and crowns.

"My goodness, Harry. This is a gorgeous set. You say it was in the attic?" Eleanor said breathlessly.

"Yup. When Ron and I started playing more I was mentioning to Ginny I should get a set to have whenever he and Hermione came for a visit. Kreacher overheard and mentioned this set. It was dusty and the pieces needed a good cleaning but he was happy to take care of it for me. Apparently it was made for one of Sirius' great great something or others and hadn't been used in decades, if not centuries. The pieces were really happy to get the chance to play."

As if on cue the black king looked up at Harry and said,

"What ho, Sir Harry. We stand ready to do thy bidding unto the death. But give the command and we shall commence the contest."

“Thank you, your majesty. Allow me to introduce my opponent, Ms. Eleanor MacManus.”

Before the black king could speak the white king looked up at her and said,

“Eleanor? Eleanor of Aquitaine? Now there is a noble name which to lay claim. Attend to me, my good people. We prepare to do battle in the name of a true Queen. Prepare to defend thyself, black devils, for we shall take the field and win the day for the fair Eleanor.”

Eleanor’s eyebrows shot up and looked over at Harry and said,

“I think I want to take him home with me.”

Harry just laughed and shook his head and indicated for Eleanor to make the first move. It was a spirited game to say the least. It was also very verbal. As pieces were commanded to move challenges were shouted and despite the rules dictating the outcome, the combat was carried out with enthusiasm and skill. And as luck, or fate, would have it, Eleanor won. As the black king succumbed the white monarch turned to Eleanor and bowed deeply.

“Under your brilliant command we have won the day and laid the dark fiends low, fair Eleanor. We look forward to the day you once more lead us upon the field of battle.”

She looked up at Harry with a twinkle in her eye and a wide smile.

“Oh, Harry, that was so much fun. I’ve never played with such a magnificent set before. I hope we can do this again.”

“I’m sure we will. I know Ginny intends to have the set placed in the library of the new house so it’ll be a lot easier once that’s done and in the meantime Kreacher can always set it up for us.”

“Has Ron played on this set yet?” she asked.

“A few times. After he beat me the first couple of times it becomes a real fight between the two kings to see which side he plays from. He

can be pretty smug about the whole thing, actually,” Harry said in a slightly irritated tone.

Eleanor just laughed. By this time the budding literary collaborators had come up with a plan on how they thought the first book should be handled. They would lay it out for Hagrid when they were able to meet with him and then get to work. They thought that Harry’s connection with Flourish and Blotts might help them find a publisher and he said he would be glad to make the request.

The next day a message arrived from Hagrid inviting them up the following afternoon to discuss the project. He indicated that Harry would have an opportunity to retrieve his broom as well. A quick trip by Kreacher confirmed that Charlie would be available and that Mrs. Weasley would be overjoyed to have Abigail visit for the day, the earlier the better.

So it was the following day Abigail made an early exit from the Black house to arrive at the Burrow. The arrangement was that when they were done with their meeting with Hagrid, the three would have dinner at the Burrow and then collect Abigail. It was shortly after lunchtime when Norbie charged up the trail to meet the three visitors. He made straight for Harry as he was the most familiar.

“Easy there, big fellow,” Harry said with a smile as he leaned on his crutches so he could give the big head some rubs.

“Good grief, he’s huge, Harry. Is this the dog Abigail has made friends with?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah, this is Norbie and he and the little one are best of friends. He’s been a big comfort to her and he’s of the opinion that he’s her personal bodyguard,” Harry said as he began to swing along down the path with Norbie gamboling on ahead. As they approached the stone hut that Hagrid called home they saw him step outside onto the path. He waved and said,

“Afternoon ta ya. Glad ya could make it. Come on inside,” he said and then went back in.

Charlie and Ginny let Harry go in first and then they followed behind with Norbie bringing up the rear. Hagrid waved them into chairs and he began carrying out a pot and cups to put on the table. Then he sat down in his greatly oversized chair and looked at his three friends.

“Charlie, it’s good ta see yas. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it has Hagrid, you look like you’re doing well, although I see a bit more gray then the last time,” Charlie said with a smile.

“Oh, aye. Can’t keep that from happenin’. And Mr. and Mrs. Potter, yer lookin’ like yer doin’ well. Except for that knee, Harry.”

“Yes we are, Hagrid. I’m almost done with my class preparation and Ginny’s been busy with the house we’re planning on building. As for the knee,” he shrugged and continued, “I’m taking it a day at a time and I’ll be seeing the healer right before coming up for the year and we’ll see what’s what. Did the Centaurs tell you how they were going to bring my broom to me? I’d have thought they’d just give it to you.”

“Interestin’ thing that, Harry. They said they’d be bringin’ it ta ya here. They was very solemn about the whole business.”

“Ok, we’ll I just wait and listen while you three discuss your project,” Harry said.

“Our project, he says. Who thought it up in the first place, Mr. Wonderful?” Ginny said with a squint but then she smiled.

Harry just returned a look of wide eyed innocence and sipped some of the excellent tea from a battered old mug. Ginny then began to lay out for Hagrid what they had in mind and Charlie joined in and soon the three were in deep discussion. Ginny pulled out a notebook and she was scribbling furiously as they discussed ideas. Harry listened for a while but then he began glancing out the window. Norbie seemed to sense his distraction and decided it was a good opportunity to look for some more head rubs. Harry obliged so he sat with one leg propped up and one hand occupied with the big head. Norbie differed from Fang in that he didn’t feel the need to rest his head in your lap while you petted him which suited Harry just fine. He

had just gotten to where the vigorous rubbing around the ears had the big dog rumbling happily when Harry noticed some movement in the shadows under the trees near the edge of the forest.

"I think the Centaurs are here. I'll go out and meet them," he said as he pushed up from the big chair and grabbed his crutches.

He made his way out the door and Norbie followed behind. The others also got up but only went as far as the door to watch. Harry swung along on his crutches to cover the short distance to the trail that led deeper into the trees. He only had to go in a handful of yards when a pair of familiar figures appeared on the pathway.

"Hail, Serpent King. Well met, Harry Potter," offered the deep voice of Bane.

"Hail, Serpent King," Ronin rumbled.

"Hello, my friends, Bane, Ronin. I am very pleased to be able to meet with you today. I would like to thank you for finding my broom and taking care of it for me," Harry replied.

"It was our honor to assist you in your great work on that evil day, friend Harry Potter. We had felt the wrongness of that creature for many turnings of the moon and we felt nature itself cry against what had been done. Those of us who were in a place to observe saw how you dealt with that one with mercy and we heard from friend Hagrid what transpired after. One of the younger of the herd found your broomstick shortly after you were observed flying off. It was found standing straight out of the ground in the very center of our meeting circle," Bane said.

"Is that where you took me that last time we met?" Harry asked.

"Indeed, Serpent King. Many argued that we should not disturb it for they saw it as a sign of your greatness and of your tie to the herd. The elder said the herd needed no such sign and the Serpent King would have need of his broom. So we have carried it here to you today. The elder would ask that you send word once your injury has

healed sufficiently that you may once again make the journey to the meeting circle.”

“I would gladly meet there again and I will make every effort to hasten when that may happen,” Harry said.

“Proceed at a pace that does not worsen the injury, friend Harry Potter. It is obvious that it is much more serious than the last, yes?” Ronin said.

“I’m afraid you are correct, friend Ronin. It was heavily damaged when I was dispensing with the facility where the kin had been debased. It will take time and effort to heal and may never be the same, but it is a small price to pay.”

The two Centaurs looked to one another and nodded slightly. Then Bane looked back behind him and waved to someone unseen in the shadows. A smaller Centaur emerged from under the trees carrying Harry’s Firebolt in both hands, almost reverently. The usually stern visage of an adult Centaur was softened somewhat by youth and despite the strategically arranged mane he could see this particularly Centaur was female.

“This is Felena. T’was she who first came upon your broomstick, Serpent King and once it was decided that we would see to its return, it was she who cared for it. She would return it to you now.”

With those words, Felena stepped forward, her eyes downcast and visibly trembling, extended the broom to Harry, who balanced on his crutches to take it from her. He looked at it carefully and there wasn’t a speck of dirt on it anywhere and the one scratch that did show looked to have been rubbed down carefully to smooth it out as much as could be. Harry looked up at Felena who was now regarding him with wide, dark eyes.

“Many thanks to you, friend Felena. It is obvious that it has been well and truly cared for. I appreciate that very much,” he said with a small smile.

"It was my honor to have been of some small service to you, Serpent King," she replied, a faint quiver in her voice.

Then Harry looked at his broom and then down at the crutches and his braced leg. He looked back up at his two friends and said wryly,

"Hmm, this is going to be a bit awkward."

The two Centaurs looked startled as they both suddenly realized what Harry just saw. How was he going to carry the broom back to the hut while on the crutches?

"We apologize, Serpent King," Bane began. "It did not occur to us that you were so encumbered. We should have come directly to friend Hagrid's hut, much as we dislike leaving the trees."

"No need to apologize, my friend. It is easily remedied," Harry said as he turned to look over his shoulder. "Ginny, could you help me here, please?"

Ginny made her way across the short stretch of grass and the few yards of trail and came to stand besides her husband. She looked up at the two male Centaurs.

"Hail, Serpent King's mate, well met," Bane offered.

"Thank you. It's very nice to see you again."

"Ginny, would you mind carrying my broom? It seems I've run out of hands," he said with a grin.

"Of course, sweetheart," she said and as she took the broom she looked it over and added. "It's in great shape, Harry. Someone really took care of it for you."

"That would be friend Felena here. She found it and took care of it for me."

Despite being a younger female, Felena was still tall enough that Ginny had to look up at her.

"Thank you, Felena. That was very kind of you," Ginny said, her voice even and polite, but Harry was picking up on something else.

"It was an honor, Serpent King's mate, and an honor to meet you as well."

"We bid you fare-thee-well and await word of your readiness to attend the circle," Bane said with a bow and with a lesser one to Ginny he turned and began moving down the trail.

"Serpent King, until then," Ronin likewise took his leave.

Felena bowed deeply and without a word but with several backward glances followed her elders back into the deep shadows. Harry didn't look over at his wife but he knew exactly what expression she was wearing. He did hear the long release of breath.

"She did me a great favor, Gin. Don't feel that way," he said quietly.

"What way would that be, Harry?" she asked, her voice edgy.

"The same way you felt when you accused one of Angelina's assistants of ogling me."

Harry looked over at this wife who was looking back at him, her eyes tight. She looked at his scar and the unruly hair and big glasses. It wasn't like he was the most handsome fellow in the world, she thought to herself. What was it about him and these girls? She just blew some hair away from her forehead and shook her head at him.

"Come on, Harry. Hagrid and Charlie will want to hear all about it," she said.

And they did. Harry spent about fifteen minutes retelling the tale and when Hagrid heard about Felena his eyebrows went up.

"Now that be summat odd fer sure. Females, particularly the younguns never come ta the edge or meet with humans. Yer really summat special ta 'em, Harry, and no mistake," he said.

Harry just gave a little nod and squeezed Ginny's hand a bit as she hadn't let go of it since they sat back down. It was close to dinner time when the three visitors left, Hagrid waving to them from his front door. In less than half an hour they were sitting in the living room of the Burrow, waiting for Arthur Weasley to return home so they could start dinner. Abigail sat in wide eyed wonder as they discussed the meeting with the Centaurs.

"Wow, Harry. That must have been something to see. I've met a couple of the younger Centaurs but it was always the boys and even they shouldn't have been there. But what about the book? What did Hagrid have to say about it?" she asked, further endearing her to Harry by tactfully changing the subject.

"He loved the idea, sweetheart," Ginny said, "He was worried about writing but once he knew I would be helping him with that he got very enthusiastic. Said he was going to dig through all his class notes and start putting some things together. He's going to draw up a list of creatures and we'll match them against what drawings you have and see where more needs to be done and of course Charlie will start work on turning his research notes into something more readable for the students and the general population."

"I want some of that writing help too, little sister," Charlie chimed in.

"Of course, big brother," she replied.

When it came time for Harry's birthday celebration, it was a very quiet one, at his request. He didn't want a big party with him hobbling around on his bad leg, so it was a quiet dinner with immediate family at the Burrow. The presents were kept modest and mostly dealt with his upcoming year at Hogwarts. He got a brand new scheduler from Ron and Hermione, some books and writing materials, and from Charlie and Eleanor, a beautifully hand carved cane, the handle of which was a subtle representation of a dragons head. Harry looked at it with raised eyebrows.

"It was my idea, Harry," Eleanor began. "Even when you can get off the crutches I'm sure you'll have need of that for a while. Plus it will add a bit to you mystique as a Professor."

"My mystique?" Harry asked.

"Of course. Other people don't see you the way we do. I can only imagine what it will be like for some first year to be sitting at a desk in a classroom at the castle, looking up at someone who's as much legend as real wizard," she said with an odd little smile.

Harry looked back at her and a thought began to form. Once again, Eleanor said something to Harry that was to have unintended and far reaching consequences.

By the second week of August Harry was pretty well prepared to begin his term at Hogwarts. Ginny had, among the other things she was doing that summer, found a small house on the outskirts of Hogsmeade to rent. While it was agreed that Harry could have Disapparated back and forth from Hogwarts to London, they both felt he would feel more a part of the school being closer and it would make it easier on him since it did take energy to make each trip and they thought he should try and conserve his as much as possible to aid his healing.

All his materials for his classes had been transported to the school and he was assured that the books he wanted the students to read were available at Flourish & Blotts. No text book was found so Harry was going to have to work from his own notes but that suited him fine. He was scheduled for his examination with Doctor Antimony in two days and his gathering with Aurors for his send off in three.

On this particular morning he was roused from his sleep by the feel of Ginny stumbling out of bed and then hearing her hurry down the corridor. Sensing something wasn't right, Harry crawled out from under the covers and pulled on his robe. He shuffled down the corridor using one crutch and no brace. When he got to the bathroom door he heard some very unpleasant sounds.

"Ginny, are you alright in there, love?"

“Just a moment,” she managed to get out before more unpleasant noises were heard.

“Ginny, what’s going on in there,” Harry said, becoming alarmed.

After a moment Ginny appeared in the doorway, her face pale but lit with a bright smile.

“Are you alright, Ginny?” Harry asked again.

“Yes and no, sweetheart. If I’m not mistaken, I think they call it morning sickness.”

Harry looked at it for a moment and then finally comprehension dawned and his eyes went wide. Now it must be said that to Harry’s credit he didn’t set back his recovery but doing the dance he wanted to do at that moment. Instead he just pulled his wife into a warm, loving embrace and they both held on laughing, crying and celebrating the beginning of the next new phase of their life together.

Harry's Future, Part 35

Harry sat on the examination table with his left leg stretched out in front of him. Doctor Antimony was conducting the examination with both his wand and his fingers. His face was a mask of concentration but otherwise gave nothing away. He finally stepped away and made some notes on a chart and then sat down on a stool next to the table and looked at Harry.

"The swelling is just about all gone, Mr. Potter. I've finally gotten a thorough look at the damage and it's fairly extensive. Both the ligaments and tendons show signs of tears and there are cartilage and bone fragments floating around in there. I'm afraid with the time that has lapsed and the residual effects of your protective magic, I'm unable to offer you any help. You're going to have to seek out a muggle surgeon if you want to have any hope of using that leg normally."

"Do you think that my mother's protective magic might prevent surgery from working?" Harry asked.

"I really have no idea, Mr. Potter. But since the injury occurred by ordinary means, that is getting hit with something hard, I'm inclined to doubt it. My guess would be it's just protection from certain kinds of magic. Do you think you'll have any trouble finding someone to help you?" Doctor Antimony asked.

"Personally, I don't know of anyone, but I'll ask my friend Hermione. Her parents are both muggle dentists. They might have some contacts that could be of help," Harry replied.

"Very good. As for now, you can switch to this lighter brace that can be worn under a looser pair of trousers and use a cane for support. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help to you."

"You've been a great help, sir. I appreciate everything you've done for me," Harry said with a genuine smile.

The healer smiled back and then showed Harry how to use the brace. Once they were both satisfied he was comfortable with it, Doctor

Antimony shook hands with Harry and then left him to get changed. Harry used his crutches and made his way out to the waiting room where Ginny and Fleur were waiting. They both looked up with questioning glances as he moved to meet them.

"The healer was able to get a good look this time and it's as big a mess as he first thought. He said it will require a muggle surgeon to fix it. I'm going to ask Hermione tomorrow if her parents might know of someone or how to look for one. He gave me a different brace to use that my pants leg will cover and I can use a cane instead of these things. Guess I won't be racing up and down the corridors at Hogwarts this year," he said with a grin.

Both of the young women were now standing and Ginny hugged Harry as best she could with the crutches in the way and Fleur added an arm around his shoulders. Then with one on each side they escorted him out of the hospital towards a waiting car that returned them to the Black house.

Despite the bad news about his knee Harry and Ginny snuggled up on the back seat contentedly. The still secret knowledge that they were going to be parents kept them afloat on a cloud of joy. They decided to confirm her condition before making the announcement so while Harry was busy at the Ministry the next day, she would make a visit to the midwife that delivered little Fred. When they got home the three made their way up the stairs and Kreacher bowed them through the open door. They went into the parlor and Harry sat down with his leg propped up. Fleur and Ginny took seats in separate chairs and Fleur said,

"So 'arry, do you think that you will 'ave any deeficulty at 'ogwarts with your leg?"

"I think I'll be able to manage, Fleur. They have me in first floor classrooms and I can always have a bunch of students haul me around if my leg gets too bad," he said with a straight face. "Or maybe Professor Flitwick can charm a chair for me that will float me around the school."

Ginny giggled and Fleur just smiled and shook her head,

"Well, at least you steell 'ave a sense of 'umor. That weell be very important for you, 'arry."

"Oh, I don't know, Fleur. I think that would be an interesting image to cultivate as a professor. Grumpy ol' Prof Potter, hobbling along with his cane, barking at the unruly students that infest his classroom," Harry said with a twisted smile.

"'arry, that is an 'orrible thing to say. You weell do no such theeng. You weell be 'appy and smiling and the students weell love to be een your class because your joy for teeching weell make eet so much fun," Fleur said seriously.

"Fleur, I was teasing. I'm sure I will do fine and if the knee acts up I'm sure Madame Pomfrey will be able to help me. So, what do you say to some lunch? I'm starving."

Ginny could only roll her eyes and laugh.

The following day, around mid morning, Harry Disapparated from the front porch to the Atrium of the Ministry. When he appeared he was hailed by a number of people, both Ministry employees and visitors, with wishes for his good health and good luck on his sabbatical. Harry smiled and waved and shook a few hands. He smiled even more when he saw Hermione hurrying over to meet him.

"Harry, it's so good to see you," she said as she took his hand in hers. "How did the visit to St. Mungo's go? I can see some things are different."

"Yeah, I have a smaller, different kind of brace and I can use a cane now instead of the crutches. The damage is pretty bad though. Dr. Antimony says I need a muggle surgeon to repair the knee. I was hoping maybe your folks might know someone or how to find them."

"I'll bet they do. I'll talk to them tonight and let you know. But for now I'm supposed to escort you to your send off. The Minister allowed us to use the big conference room, but it's still likely to be a tight fit."

“Really? I didn’t think so many people would be that eager to see me go,” Harry said in a mournful tone.

Hermione looked at him with a start and then when she saw the mischievous glint in his eye she gave him a ‘look’ and light swat on the arm, then laughed. This got him laughing as they slowly made their way towards the conference room. When they arrived the room was already full and there were many shouted greetings. Harry was a little taken aback by the display but he rallied quickly and soon was shaking hands as he made his way around the room. This went on for around a quarter of an hour and then the Minister and Director arrived and things settled down. Harry was shown to a chair at the front of the room.

“Well, this is truly a wonderful turn out,” the Minister began. “The Director and I thought we’d give you some time to yourselves before we came in and put a damper on things. But seriously, we wanted to take this opportunity to express some thoughts to and about Chief Potter that are long overdue. I think it’s safe to say that the Chief, or Harry as he prefers, has long since passed the point where anything we could do or say would be adequate compensation for what he has given to our community. It would most likely be a great embarrassment to him for me to go down the list so suffice to say by the time he graduated from Hogwarts his achievements were enough to place him at the top of any roll of wizarding greats. But that wasn’t enough. I think one of my most vivid memories will be that day shortly after his final defeat of Voldemort when he informed me that he was interested in applying for Auror duty. And he did it from the flat of his back in a sick bed. To say I was surprised would be a gross understatement. I wasn’t sure if I should admire him for his sense of purpose or suggest he be examined for some sort of head injury,” the Minister said as he smiled down at Harry while those in attendance laughed.

“But you know the story. Most of you here in this room are the story. I will admit I did Harry a great disservice. It had always been my intention to put him in a leadership role but circumstances forced my hand and Harry was asked to take on a role that he had doubts about. I have to admit I had a few myself. But as you all know he rose to the challenge magnificently and the results speak for themselves. His

time here has been an unqualified success and despite any misgivings Harry may have about his performance I think you will all agree it has been nothing short of phenomenal.”

The Minister had to pause as applause broke out in the room. Harry had been keeping his eyes low, concentrating on a small knot in the table top in front of him but he did look up now and he made eye contact with Hermione who was clapping, her eyes misty. The Minister raised his hands and when it quieted down he continued.

“Now for those of you who know Harry well, you know that right about now he’d be very happy if I just stopped talking. If you asked him about his time in the job he would most likely shrug and give you that half smile of his and say ‘I just tried to do my best’. Of course we all know how good his best can be. I just thought it was time it was said in front of people who could truly appreciate what he’s done for us. So to close I’ll just say thank you, Harry, for everything you’ve accomplished so far and whatever your future holds I’m convinced it will be full of success and I hope, happiness.”

The Minister reached down to shake Harry’s hand. Harry gave him the smile and shrug which got everyone laughing. Next to speak was the Director.

“The Minister has managed to capture very well what I’m sure we all think about Harry’s accomplishments. He and I began our work here on the same day. When I had the opportunity to meet him for the first time I have to admit I had a hard time associating the amazing stories with which we were all so familiar with the unassuming young man who was sitting across from me. Now there are some here who have had the privilege to know Harry on a more personal level and had they been there I’m sure they would have had no such issues. I’ve taken the time to speak with these individuals, those patrollers who were members of the DA at Hogwarts during those dark times and my special assistant Hermione Weasley. All I can say is had I known then what I know now, there would have been no doubts, no questions, only confidence in what he was going to accomplish in the relatively short time he has been here. I would just like to add my best wishes to the Ministers and say that whatever decisions you make about your future, Harry, I’m confident of your every success.”

There was more applause as the Director shook hands with Harry and then indicated he should say something. Harry got up from his chair and leaning on the new dragon handled cane looked at all the people crammed into the room. Hermione was nearby; Ron was huddled up with the rest of the Patrollers further back in the room. He could see Milligan and Maxwell and Muntab sitting at the table. Some of the people he recognized as Ministry employees from other departments including the head of the Testing Division. He smiled a bit and then said,

“There was a time when after hearing all those nice things said about me I’d have made some comment about needing to have the air valve in my head opened up, but my wife finds that really annoying so for her sake I’ll pass on it today. I will say that I really appreciate what the Minister and Director have said and your responses. What they failed to say was that all of my accomplishments have been the direct result of the assistance and cooperation of more people than I could begin to count. When I agreed to take on this job there were plenty of people who had serious doubts that I’d be able to pull it off, not the least of which was me. But with a lot of hard work and sacrifice we made a lot of good things happen. Some things didn’t turn out the way I had hoped. My biggest disappointment was that I had so little to do with training the Patrollers but that didn’t seem to matter because you all are doing terrific work and I know for a fact that the members of our community appreciate everything you do every day for them. And now as you all know I’ll be spending the year up at Hogwarts, a place that is very, very special to me. I’m sure you’ve all heard that Professor McGonagall would very much like me to make it a permanent change of profession. I can honestly tell you I don’t know which direction I’ll be taking. I’ve been thinking about it a lot while I’ve been convalescing and my family has had a lot to say about. But whatever happens, I just want you all to know that our accomplishments these last few years and the associations I’ve developed here will sit at the very top of the list of things that I take pride in. Thank you all for what you’ve done and will do to continue to build on that success,” he said with a smile.

There was a great deal more applause and a number of people came forward to offer congratulations, well wishes and handshakes and a

few hugs. The crowd began to thin out a bit but a number of people remained and the room buzzed with conversation. Harry answered questions about the status of his knee, what kind of classes he would be teaching, and did he think he'd be up at the camp that had started that week. As lunch time approached Harry found himself sitting at the end of the conference table with Hermione, Ron and most of the DA members who were now patrollers.

"So, you all have had chats with the Director about me, eh?" Harry asked.

"Well, not just about you, Harry," Parvati Patel replied. "We talked about a bunch of different things but you were one of the main topics."

"He was interested in how we got organized and how you taught us and things like that," Alicia Spinnet added.

"Well it sounds like you said some nice things so thanks for that. If I've never said this to you before I'm very proud of the way you've all been performing and I'm sure you are going to have great careers here," Harry said seriously.

"Harry," Parvati began, her tone low and serious. "There's something that those of us who aren't your family, I mean Ron and Hermione, have talked about and I was voted to tell you. We've been discussing this and we want you to know we don't want you coming back after this year."

Harry looked very surprised, as did Ron and Hermione.

"What do you mean, Parvati?"

"We all want you to stay at Hogwarts and keep teaching. As much as we've been proud to work for you we think you've done enough. You can't keep taking the abuse you've endured. But more importantly, we have firsthand experience being taught by you and we want that for our children and hopefully our grandchildren. I know you could have a lot of influence if you stayed here but thinking of all the students you could reach in a career at Hogwarts, it would be so

much more. Please think on it, Harry. We may be Patrollers and you are our boss, but first we were, and still are, your friends and we want you to be around for a long, long time and we want to hear our kids come home and tell us what we already know, that you are an awesome wizard and teacher.”

By the time she was done, tears were running down her cheeks and Harry’s eyes were misting over. He looked around at those around him, his friends, schoolmates and his two closet friends in the world, all nodding with small smiles and not a few misty eyes. He was having a hard time finding his voice. He reached across the table and took Parvati’s hand in his.

“Thank you for that, Parvati, everyone. A number of people have suggested similar thoughts to me lately. I don’t know what I’ll do but I do know that with you all here, this department is in very good hands and I know that you’ll have a lot to do with how it’s run in the future. I also want you to know that whatever becomes of me, if I can ever do anything for any of you, all you have to do is ask.”

They all stood up and Harry held out his hand but Parvati just brushed it aside and stepped up to hug him. This was followed by handshakes from the guys and a hug from Alicia Spinnet. They said last farewells and left Harry with Hermione and Ron. The Minister was watching from the other end of the room and he waved Harry over.

“I just wanted to say a final good bye, Harry. I know you’re trying to make a big decision but I wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t mention something. If you do decide to come back, in all likelihood you’d wind up as Minister of Magic one day.”

“Oh, no, sir, I don’t think so,” Harry said with a laugh. “I appreciate your thoughts but I don’t think I have the temperament for the job. You have to deal with a lot of disagreeable people and that takes a lot of patience and diplomacy and that just isn’t me.”

“I don’t know, Harry. You did quite well with the French trying to establish the exchange programs and the joint work on the smuggling operation,” the Minister responded.

"Thank you, sir, but that was because we were all in agreement on what we were trying to do. You should have seen how annoyed I got when I found out the exchange program was been held up by 'tradionalists' from both sides. But if you're looking to the future I think you're in the right room," Harry said and he turned his head to look down to the other end of the room.

The Minister followed and saw Hermione chatting with Ron. He looked back at Harry.

"You're referring to Mrs. Weasley?"

"I am. I think if you gave her a few more years here finishing up the legal status issue of the other magical races and then started moving her around the Ministry to broaden her experience she'd be a perfect candidate for Minister one day," Harry said confidently.

"What about Ron Weasley there?" the Minister asked.

"I think Ron is a bit too self conscious to put in too visible a role, but he's showing signs of a real grasp of tactics and strategies. I see him easily becoming the head of the tactical squad and maybe even the Chief."

"Harry, would you do me a favor?"

"Certainly, sir, if I can," Harry replied.

"Whatever happens, coming back or staying at Hogwarts, would you please make yourself available for these little discussions? I'd like to have the benefit of your advice from time to time," the Minister said with a smile.

"I can do that, sir, if you think it would be of help."

"Oh, I think so, Harry, I think so," Shacklebolt said holding out his hand for Harry to shake. "So long, Harry, and good luck."

"Thank you, sir, and thank you, for everything," Harry said.

"Hmmm, I think that should have been what I said, but you're welcome, young man," and with a clap on the shoulder the Minister left the room.

Harry walked back down to the end of the table and sat down.

"Well, you two, that was an interesting event. But it's about lunch time and I'm starved. What do you say I take you both to lunch, my treat, as a way to say thanks for all the good work and support?"

"That would be wonderful, Harry. We'd love to, wouldn't we, Ron?" Hermione replied.

"I am pretty hungry myself but I'm not so sure I want to be anywhere around Harry if he's that hungry. I like my fingers right where they are," Ron said with a straight face.

Harry's eyebrows shot up and then he just shook his head as his two best friends started laughing. After lunch he returned home and was sitting in the study trying to read through some of his notes for his first classes but he kept looking up waiting for Ginny to return home. Finally he heard Kreacher welcome her home and he looked at the doorway of the study expectantly. When she appeared her face gave it all away but he waited to hear the words.

"Hello, there Papa Potter," she said, her face lit up with a wide smile.

Harry smiled just as wide and as best he could rose from his chair and met his wife half way where they hugged and kissed and laughed and cried. When they calmed down enough to be coherent Harry asked if she thought they should go see her mother and break the news.

"Oh, I think so, Harry. If she doesn't hear it from us, we are going to be in very big trouble," she said with a laugh. "And while we are at it, we can collect little Miss Abigail."

"Ok. How long can you continue to Disapparate? Did you talk about that?" Harry asked.

"It was recommended to stop it around the seventh month but it could be done in an emergency. The big issue appears to be the energy depletion and the affect it can have on the baby and mother. Once we get settled in up at Hogsmeade I intend to keep it to a minimum. But let's get going."

"Kreacher? We're heading to the Burrow and chances are we'll be staying for dinner."

"Yes, Master Harry."

Harry and Ginny stepped out onto the porch and Disapparated to the back yard of the Burrow. Despite her great excitement Ginny suppressed her urge to dash right through the back door and kept pace with Harry, her arm hooked in his. When they got to the back door she banged on it and then opened it and yelled inside,

"Anybody home?"

"Ginny dear, how wonderful," Mrs. Weasley called back. "Come in. Is Harry with you? Is everything alright?"

"Yes, he is," she said as they entered the kitchen, "and everything is wonderful."

"So what brings you two out here, it's not time to take Abigail home already is it?"

"No, Mum. We have some news we thought we'd like to share," Ginny said, her eyes bright.

Mrs. Weasley looked at her daughter expectantly while Harry could see Abigail smiling brightly from the living room. Ginny looked at her mum and said,

"You're going to be a grandmother again. Sometime in April, we think."

Mrs. Weasley looked at her daughter and then her son-in-law and then let out a loud yell and rushed to sweep them both up in a tight embrace. While not quite the emotional outpouring as when they announced their engagement it was still rather loud and for Harry, a bit painful. Fortunately, Molly Weasley seemed to realize what she was doing and backed off enough for Harry to take the weight off his left leg.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry, but I’m so happy for you two. Come in to the living room and get off that bad leg.”

Mrs. Weasley walked into the living room with her arm around her daughter and Harry trailing behind. He sat down on the couch and adjusted the new brace that allowed him to sit more or less normally for a while. Ginny sat down gently beside him and Mrs. Weasley sat in her chair nearby. Abigail was looking at her ‘parents’ with an odd smile.

“Oh, my, this is so exciting. So April you say. I hope that house you’re renting will be big enough.”

“Well, hopefully the new house will be done by then. But if not we can make due until it is,” Ginny replied.

Harry was watching his ward while the discussion was going on. He could tell some serious thinking was going on behind that smile.

“What are you thinking, little one?”

“Well, I’m having trouble figuring something out. Do I consider myself an aunt or a big sister or am I not really anything at all?” she said quietly.

“Oh, you most certainly are something, little one. Don’t ever think otherwise,” Harry said seriously. “As to the rest of it, why don’t you just let the baby figure that out? As your relationship grows I think it will sort itself out,” he concluded with a smile.

"You know, dear, I've had the same trouble with you. I can't figure out if you're the oldest of my grandchildren or my youngest child," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Well, since I tend to think of Harry and Ginny like my dad and mum, and you're their mum, then I'd have to say you're like my gram, right?" Abigail replied.

"I guess it would sort out that way wouldn't it?" Molly Weasley said with a grin.

They talked for another hour or so and then Molly decided it was time to start work on dinner and she'd take no argument about Harry and Ginny staying. Abigail assumed her post as cooks helper and Harry and Ginny moved to the kitchen table so the conversation could continue.

"So, you two, have you given any thought to names?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Not seriously, Mum," Ginny said, "but I think James or Lily depending on whether it's a boy or girl."

"Really, love?" Harry asked.

"I think so, Harry. You are their only son so I think our children should carry on with their names. My brothers can take care of the Weasley side of the family. Right, Mum?"

"Right you are, my dear," Mrs. Weasley replied from by the stove as Harry took Ginny's hand and kissed it.

When Mr. Weasley returned home from work the excitement repeated and Arthur got very misty eyed as he hugged his daughter. While he never made any big demonstrations about it, he held his daughter in a very special place in his heart, as fathers often do. Dinner was a very happy occasion and on the following day a number of visitors arrived at the Black house as the news spread via the Weasley telegraph.

Harry and Ginny were due to make the move to Hogsmeade on Sunday with a send off at the Burrow on Saturday. While it had intended to be an occasion for both of them, the news of Ginny's pregnancy made her the center of focus and Harry was thoroughly enjoying himself. He sat in the new chaise lounge watching the Weasley women make a fuss over his wife. What Harry couldn't figure out was why, since they had pretty much done the same thing just couple of days ago, but she was having so much fun it didn't really matter. Charlie and Bill hadn't been able to get away since it was the first Saturday of the Quidditch camp but with Eleanor and Fleur there they weren't really missed all that much. Harry thought back to something Bill had said last summer about a father not being all that necessary around an infant. He guessed that that held true for a mother-to-be as well. Ron had arrived a few minutes ago, having just come off duty and he was hunting up the wizard's chess set and a small table so they could play outside.

While Harry was waiting he noticed Audrey looking over at him. When they made eye contact she gave him a little smile and walked over to him. She sat on the edge of the lounge chair, being careful not to disturb his leg.

"Congratulations, Harry. I know most of the attention goes to the mother-to-be but having seen how you've been with Abigail, I know you're going to be a great father," she said with a smile.

"Thanks, Audrey. I hope so."

"Um, Harry. I know this is going to sound rather silly, but with you going off to Hogwarts we won't be seeing much of you for a while. I was wondering if you might be willing to show me the dragon side of you, just once?" she asked, her face almost childlike.

"Hmm, I suppose that might be possible. There's no time like the present, I guess. How about giving me a hand up first though," Harry said.

Audrey smiled wide, stood up and then offered Harry her hand. She helped pull him up and he took up his cane and began walking toward the front wall. He called back to Ginny.

“Gin, excuse me a minute will you. I thought I’d let Audrey in on the full secret,” he said with a grin.

“Alright, but be careful please, Harry. Watch out for your knee,” she said.

He gave her a nod and then walked to where he could pass through the wall using the front door pathway.

“Why don’t you wait here, Audrey? I need some room for this. Oh, and would you hold this for me,” he said, handing her the cane.

“Alright, Harry.”

Harry walked slowly across the road and into the field and its summer browned grass. When he thought he was far enough he turned around and thought ‘big’. Within two heartbeats he was looking down at Audrey. The discomfort in his knee grew noticeably so he slowly swiveled down onto all fours and shifted so that most of his bulk rested on his three good legs. He looked at Audrey saw the shock and awe on her face. He lowered his head so that he was more eye to eye with her.

“Can you understand me, Harry?”

The massive head nodded. She held her hands up to her mouth, her eyes wide and she laughed a little. She stepped out from behind the wall and moved sideways so she could see down his length. She couldn’t help notice the way his left rear leg was resting only lightly on the ground.

“Harry, I’m sorry, this is stressing your knee. Let me move closer to where you’ll be then change back. I’m convinced,” she laughed again.

She quickly moved into the grass and then took a spot not far from where she thought he’d be standing. Harry watched until she was standing still and then he thought about his other self and within two heartbeats he was standing looking at Audrey a short distance away.

She hurried over and handed him his cane. He leaned on it and looked at her.

“So, what do you think?” he asked.

“It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen, Harry. I come from a long line of magical folk and I thought I’d heard of everything but this is incredible. You know, there was a tiny bit of me that still thought it was some kind of joke but I’m convinced,” she said with a laugh.

Harry smiled and indicated they should go join the others. She hooked her arm in his free one and walked slowly at his side. As they approached the others Ginny looked up and said with an impish grin,

“So, what did you think?”

“I saw it, but it is still so amazing, Ginny,” she said as she released Harry’s arm who then went to face off against Ron.

Audrey resumed her seat with the other ladies. She looked over at Harry as he helped Ron set the vocal and sometimes fractious chessmen in place. Then she said almost to herself,

“It makes you wonder why he hasn’t tried to take over the whole world.”

This comment was met at first with total silence and then one after another the women of Harry’s family began to laugh. Audrey looked around to see Ginny, Mrs. Weasley, Fleur and even Eleanor laughing openly. Little Victoire was giggling from her place in her mothers lap in imitation of those around her. Audrey frowned and asked,

“What’s so funny? He must be at least as strong as Voldemort or Grindelwald were. Add to that the dragon and it’s not such an odd idea.”

Mrs. Weasley was the first to regain her composure and looked at her daughter-in-law with a smile. After wiping her eyes she began to say,

“My dear, it wouldn’t be such a ridiculous idea if we were talking about someone other than our Harry, but it is most likely the furthest thing from his mind. Didn’t Percy tell you anything about him?”

“Not a great deal. We talked about what happened that night when Harry found out what the healers from St. Mungo’s told you. But he doesn’t say much about him at all, even when I ask,” Audrey replied.

Mrs. Weasley nodded as she said,

“Harry and Percy had a bit of an issue there for a time while Harry was still at school and trying to deal with Voldemort but that’s all been dealt with. I imagine Percy isn’t too interested in discussing it, but what it means is that you don’t know Harry well enough to answer your own question. Simply put, Harry doesn’t see his power as something that should be used to his benefit but to use to protect his family and his world. You will likely never see him use his wand to make things easier for him, even with the bad knee. Ginny, have you ever seen him use it to fetch a book from a shelf?”

“No, Mum. He always goes to the bookcase and gets it himself. Frankly, he wouldn’t even need the wand but I don’t think it ever occurs to him. I know he’s used it when teaching but I’m sure that’s because he sees it as a tool. You know, Audrey, he didn’t even want to be the captain of the Quidditch team when it was offered to him during our seventh year. In fact, he told me just last night that when he went to work for his send-off party, the Minister suggested that if he returned that one day he could be the Minister of Magic. He was laughing when he told me. He said he couldn’t deal with all the people who would want to argue with him,” she said with a smile that then slid off her face. “I think he understands what could happen if his frustration with such things would flare into anger. I also think that the idea of him being in charge of everything is just not one he would ever consider.”

Eleanor saw the look on Audrey’s face and smiled as she said,

“Don’t feel bad, Aud. I formed some conclusions about Harry without knowing the details and you saw how well that turned out.”

Audrey smiled a bit at the memory and watched as Harry let out a long groan and slapped his forehead as Ron sprung a trap on him. Ginny watched the exchange and then said,

“Besides, considering he keeps losing to my brother at wizards chess I’m not so sure he would be all that good at world domination.”

This got more laughs, Audrey included. By the end of the afternoon Harry lost three straight games to Ron but the last one was a fight to the end. Despite Ginny’s seemingly denigrating remark about Harry’s ability the truth was he was actually an excellent player when he put his mind to it. He was just handicapped by the fact he usually played against a truly gifted player in Ron. When they left for the Burrow Harry and Ginny were loaded down with her gifts. In fact Harry had to call on Kreacher to come and help carry some of the bags home. As they carried the booty to their room Harry had a thought.

“Um, Gin, I realized that I left all the moving chores in your hands, but I guess I should ask how things have gone.”

“It’s been fine, Harry. I’ve had more than enough help. Kreacher has been a very big help and he even enlisted some of the Hogwarts housekeeping staff. The only thing left to go is our bed.”

“Our bed?” Harry asked, sounding very surprised.

“Yes, sweetheart. You didn’t think we were going to sleep in some rented bed did you? I don’t mind a kitchen table and chairs, but not a bed. After you and I leave for Hogsmeade in the morning Kreacher and some of his helpers will take it apart and bring it up to our rented house and put it back together. Then he’ll come back and close up this house and join us back at Hogsmeade. Abigail is going to spend the last week with my Mum and Dad, sort of a vacation from her vacation. I’ll go back to make sure she gets on the train and then I’ll be back. So, set your mind at ease, my love. It’s all well in hand,” she said with a smile.

Apparently, she was right. When Ginny and Harry arrived outside the small house they rented on the edge of Hogsmeade all of the things they would need for setting up housekeeping were already there and

in place. It was a two storey stone structure with a kitchen, small parlor and what would pass for Harry's study/office on the first floor and two bedrooms and a bathroom on the second. It didn't take long to take the tour and Harry's only comment was,

"Snug."

"It will be fine for the short amount of time we'll be here and since it's closer to the school side of town it will cut down on your walk to and from. Since it looks like Kreacher and his friends have got everything in order what do you say we take a walk, a slow walk, to the stadium and see how the camp is going?" Ginny suggested.

"Sounds like a good idea and if it gets to be too much you can always carry me back," he said with a smile.

"You're forgetting, Harry. This is Hogsmeade. I can just levitate you and float you home."

Harry laughed and picked up his cane and followed Ginny out of the house. They walked slowly hand in hand towards the school gates acknowledging the greetings from the few residents they passed on the way. Once on the grounds they made their way to the stadium. As they walked through the entrance tunnel the sounds of voices loud enough to be heard by flyers reached them. Harry and Ginny came out into the bright August sun and could see the organized chaos of several different groups of campers being put through their paces. They quietly made their way up into the stands, unnoticed by anyone.

Taking seats in the shadow of one of the VIP towers they were able to watch most of the action, avoid the heat of the sun and enjoy some quiet time while watching one of their favorite activities. As they watched they exchanged comments on how well someone was doing, who could use a little more work on their technique and the prospects for some good competition this year. Ginny wasn't inclined to do any serious flying anytime soon but they both had mentioned taking in as many games as they could.

“You know this is really fun, Harry. Just sitting and watching. The only thing missing is some snacks and beverages,” Ginny said with a smile.

“Yeah, next time we should bring a basket full of Kreacher’s best,” Harry said as he watched a seeker make a rather risky grab. “Someone better tell that seeker to watch his balance. He almost came off his broom.”

But almost as soon as he said it they saw Charlie zoom into view and call the young flyer to a halt so he could explain the poor move and how to do it properly. After he was done he went to turn and his eyes swept across where Ginny and Harry were sitting. His face split in a big grin and he flew over to hover in front of them.

“Hey, you two. When did you get here?”

“About an hour and half ago, I guess,” Harry said. “We’ve just been watching and enjoying.”

“Do you want to come down and talk to the campers?” Charlie asked.

“If you don’t mind, Charlie, we’d just like to watch. Maybe we could join you for dinner and talk to them then?” Harry said.

“Sounds like a good idea. See you then. Dinner starts at seven.”

“We’ll be there,” Ginny said and then she turned to Harry. “Well done you, Harry. We get to stay up here and watch and then get a nice dinner in the bargain. My hero,” she finished with a laugh.

“My love, you give me far too much credit. I was just being selfish and lazy. I didn’t want to move from our spot and then I get to eat all I want without putting a big dent in our food budget,” he said with a laugh.

They settled back to watch more of the practice with Ginny holding tight to his arm. Harry thought it was a wonderful start to his time at Hogwarts. The practicing finished around half past five and as the students were sent off to the showers, Harry and Ginny slowly made

their way down to the pitch. Charlie and Bill came over to greet them with hugs and handshakes.

“How are you feeling, Harry? What’s the word on the knee?” Bill asked.

“It’s a mess, Bill. I’m going to have to see a muggle surgeon to have any hope of it being fixed. Hermione’s parents are talking to someone about it for me and will let me know when I can see them. Apparently it’s someone they know from their early days when they had offices in the same medical arts building. Now they treat a lot of muggle sportsmen for injuries so I think they should be able to help. Thankfully, I know enough about being a muggle that I should be able to make it work.”

“I hope you’ll be able to get back on a broom someday, Harry. We had a lot of long faces around here when they found out you weren’t going to be able to help out. But they’ll be glad to see you tonight,” Charlie offered. “Why don’t you hang around a bit and then we can all walk up together.”

“Sounds good, just don’t take too long. It will take a bit of time with this thing,” Harry said as he brandished his cane.

“I can levitate you up there, my love,” Ginny said, giving Harry an adoring look, batting her eyelashes until everyone started to laugh.

As Harry predicted the walk was slow and took some time but it wasn’t that bad and it passed pleasantly as Bill and Charlie filled them in on how the campers were progressing. Those that returned from last year were really showing improvement and a couple of soon to be first years were showing some real promise. Harry wore a small smile, inwardly pleased that his idea to bring the Beauxbaton concept to Hogwarts was working out so well.

As was custom with guests, Harry and Ginny were seated at separate tables with the campers and they spent their meal talking Quidditch. Harry discussed some of his more spectacular games and moments while Ginny was engrossed in a running conversation about what it was like to play in the pros. This was one arena in which Ginny could

claim some ascendancy over her husband but on the one occasion that Harry was mentioned she didn't hesitate to explain that he had indeed been invited to try out for two major teams but he chose to go to Auror training instead. This caused most of the heads at her table to turn in Harry's direction.

After dinner was over and the two were walking back to the house in the still warm summer air they agreed it had been a very enjoyable day. Ginny had accepted an invitation from her brothers to spend some time each day of the coming week at the stadium while Harry worked to get his classrooms in order but he alluded that he would probably be able to find some time to come down, most likely in the later part of the afternoon. Both were told they would be expected at dinner each evening.

As the week proceeded, Harry would be hard pressed if asked to determine which part of the day he enjoyed more. He was glad to be able to start getting things in order for his new class. The room he was assigned was on the first floor in close proximity to the DADA room and the room set aside for Firenze and his Divination class. On his second day he was sitting at his desk going over some notes and materials when he heard the sound of hooves on the polished stone floor. As he looked up he saw the Centaur standing in the doorway.

"Greetings, Harry Potter. May I enter?"

"Of course, Firenze. Please come in. I hope you'll excuse me if I don't stand up. The knee is acting up a bit today," Harry replied.

"There is no need to apologize. One thinks that you may be overdoing it with walking to the castle in the morning then down and back to the Stadium and then home again."

"You're probably right, my friend, but there's no help for it. My wife as offered to levitate me around the grounds but I think that would be just a bit ridiculous," Harry said with a laugh.

The Centaur came to stand before Harry's desk, which thanks to the platform beneath it put them almost at eye level to each other, and he

offered his hand. Harry took it in the fashion of the Centaurs by gripping the forearm.

“Despite your pain, you look content, friend Harry Potter. You are happy to be here.”

“I am, Firenze. This is one of my very favorite places and I’ll be doing something I really enjoy. On top of that, my wife and I are expecting our first child in the spring. I am very content,” Harry replied. “And you? You’ve been here a while now. Are you content?”

“I fear being content is not in my nature. ‘Tis one of the reasons I ran afoul of my herd. I was constantly searching for answers that were not forthcoming from the stars.”

“Isn’t it a little odd then that you’re teaching Divination?” Harry asked.

“It would seem so, but when Dumbledore first asked for my assistance it was my understanding that he was looking for a more practical approach than the unrestrained mysticism of Professor Trelawney. I teach them some ways to understand the signs in the stars but I stress that they would do better to seek their own path, as you and I have discussed before.”

“I wish I had had more time to spend with you as a teacher then, Firenze. I consider my two years of Divination to have been pretty much a waste,” Harry said with a hint of scorn in his voice.

“Give it not a thought, friend Harry Potter. We can not change what has been, only learn from it. I will leave you to your work now. I wished to greet and welcome you. I would take it as a great kindness if you would allow our conversations to continue during your time here. I derive great satisfaction from our discourse,” Firenze said solemnly.

“Of course. I’m always happy for the chance to talk to you,” Harry replied.

The Centaur nodded and turned and left the classroom, the clacking of his hooves fading down the corridor. Harry had another visitor later

in the week that was equally interesting. Professor Slughorn knocked on the open doorframe and stuck his head in.

“I say, Harry. Might I have a moment?”

“Of course, Professor. Please come in. It’s good to see you.”

“My apologies, I should have said ‘Professor Potter’,” Slughorn said with a grin.

“That’s alright, sir. It’s going to take me some time to get used to it, too.”

“Harry, I stopped by to see how you were getting on. There has been some concern shared by the faculty about your leg and the stress your duties here will place on it. I want you to know that I will be more than happy to supply one of several effective potions to help you cope. If you start having problems, please see Poppy Pomfrey and she’ll let me know what you need,” the Potions Professor said as he came forward, setting himself against a student desk across from Harry.

“Thank you, sir. That’s much appreciated. I’m hoping that a muggle surgeon can put it all back together again but that will take some time to sort out so it’s good to know I’ll have your help,” Harry said with a grin.

“Not at all, my boy,” the Professor said, his face very serious. “It would be a great disservice to your mother’s memory if I were not to help in any way I could. I know I’ve said this before but your mother was my most favorite student. And not just for her skills with potions. You know I often thought that she could have taken my place here if she so chose. But as I was saying it was more than that. You never really got the chance to know that your mother was one of the kindest souls I ever met. She befriended some of the most unlikely of students, as if she could see the good in their hearts like you and I read a book.”

Harry thought immediately of Severus Snape and was sure that’s who Professor Slughorn had in mind.

"I know everyone tells you that you look just like your father, except the eyes of course, but it's your mother that you take after in most ways, at least as I have observed. To be honest with you, my boy, I had very little use for your father in his early years here. There was much in his nature that was not very admirable but fortunately he seemed to shed that as he matured. I believe your mother had a great deal to do with that. I'm very happy to see her spirit returned to this place and I'm looking forward to having you as a colleague. I fully expect to see her promise fulfilled in your being here," the older man said, his face looking sad yet hopeful.

Harry's emotions were stirred up by the time the Professor finished. The mention of his mother and their apparently shared character brought a lump to his throat. He wasn't pleased to hear the comments about his father as a younger student but he already knew the sad truth and had come to accept it. The last comments threatened to break his composure but he kept himself under control.

"Thank you, Professor Slughorn. It's not often that someone takes the time to talk to me about my parents. I think most of my family thinks I'm a little fragile in some ways and are afraid to mention certain things. I appreciate you telling me your thoughts. I'm looking forward to being here and I hope I won't be too much of a burden on your supply cabinet," he finished with a grin.

This comment broke the older man's solemn mood and he laughed heartily.

"Not at all, my boy, not at all. Perhaps I'll assign some promising NEWT candidate the task of being your chemist," he said with a smile and then hauled himself to his feet and came up to the desk and offered his hand to Harry.

Harry took it with a smile and then watched Slughorn's back as he left. He knew the Professor was given to extravagant comments and his habit of picking pet students never sat well with Harry but he felt the Professor's comments about his parents, particularly his mother, were straight from the heart. It suggested to Harry that people were often

not fully what you saw and he needed to remember that. Severus Snape was such a one, he had come to learn at a bitter cost.

Since the first of September fell on a Saturday this year, school was set for Monday morning with the Express arriving on Sunday evening. Ginny had left for the Burrow to get Abigail taken care of. Her Mum was fully capable of dealing with it but Ginny's maternal instincts, first aroused by her 'little sister' were in full flower and she insisted on being there. Harry was looking forward to seeing her. He would have liked to have met her at the station but as faculty he needed to be at the head table when the students arrived.

So it was that on Sunday evening the Great Hall was bright with lights and Harry, or should it be said, Professor Potter was sitting at his place at the head table. He smiled when he arrived to see that he had been given a seat that put him between Bill and Hagrid. Professor McGonagall seemed especially pleased when she greeted him. Harry had thought no kneazle had ever looked happier after catching a garden gnome. As he sat there in his formal robes, the one he wore to Beauxbaton, he watched as the students filed in and found their new places at their house tables. When Abigail arrived he watched her and when she looked up and saw him they shared smiles and waves, his small and dignified and hers expansive and unrestrained. Other students also looked up and offered various waves and smiles.

As he leaned back in his chair he took in the sight of the Hall, the students and the Professors to either side of him. He thought about the classrooms, the stadium and the town of Hogsmeade. He had a feeling that he had felt only twice before that he could remember. The first was when he returned to Hogwarts as a second year. The other was when he spent the full month of August at the Burrow for the first time. It was the feeling of coming home.

Author's note: I have received several reviews that have included comments fearing the end of the story based on the final paragraph or sentence from a chapter. In true JKR fashion this story will conclude with an epilogue (already written) and the epilogue ends with the line "And that my friends is well and truly THE END". So as long as you see a heading that contains 'Part XX' and no final 'THE END' be confident that more will follow.

Harry's Future, Part 36

It was Monday morning and Harry was sitting at his desk, awaiting the arrival of his first class of the new term. He was starting with the fifth years of his new class in Applied Magic. He was feeling in a rather good mood. He was happy to be starting his sabbatical year and his knee was relatively pain free. This was largely due to a rather pleasant surprise he received the previous evening. As the welcome back feast was concluding, Professor McGonagall had informed him that as a result of concerns raised about the issues with his knee and the walk to and from the school it was decided to assign one of the thestral pulled carriages to him.

It was a bit odd to have the driverless carriage outside his door that morning but it made for a quick, painless ride and he was very grateful. So it was that as the students began to arrive they found him smiling and greeting them warmly.

"Good morning, fifth years. Please come in and find yourselves seats and we'll get started."

What they found was a slightly different arrangement than usual for a Hogwarts classroom. Harry recalled the remarks that Eleanor had made regarding the stories about him overawing some impressionable first year and he made a decision about how he was going to conduct all his classes. The students' desks had been pushed back a bit and a tall stool was on the floor directly in front of Harry's desk. After every one had taken their seats Harry stood up and using the cane stepped out from behind his desk and down off the raised platform. He sat on the stool and looked at the faces regarding him.

“Firstly, I’d like to thank you all for taking a risk and signing up for such a new course. As you saw from your list there is no formal textbook for the course. You’ll be working from notes and assigned reading. As we need to we will also make reference to texts from other classes. As I said this is a new course and I and some of the other Professors have put in a lot of time this last year pulling it together. But that doesn’t mean that we got it all right. So I’m going to be asking for your help this year. If you see things that don’t make sense to you or you think might be presented in a better way, please feel free to let me know. You can talk to me after class, drop me a note or since I have a few more free periods than the other Professors there’s a good chance I’ll be sitting in the Great Hall and you can talk to me there,” he said.

He looked out over the class, a group of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Despite it being a new elective the classes for Applied Magic were fully subscribed so he had two sessions of each level, with two houses in each session. While very gratified at the response Harry privately hoped that he didn’t wind up disappointing them. With a deep breath he began,

“So, let’s begin.”

And they did and by the time his first session was over he had to admit to himself that it went pretty well. He saw the students scribbling furiously as he talked. When he asked a question there were many hands raised and when he asked if anyone had any questions there were usually more than a few. When it came time to dismiss the class he was almost sad in a way, it had been great fun. But he realized there were many more to come over the span of the year so the feeling didn’t linger.

That afternoon he had his first session with his first year DADA class. He intended to start it the same as he had when he was a teaching assistant but with the bad knee he wasn’t prepared to make that walk so he had requested the assistance of a pair of senior students who had the afternoon free. His volunteers were a Ravenclaw seventh year witch and a Slytherin sixth year wizard.

Harry was using the DADA classroom with all its strange and scary models and creatures and such so he started from the lower position on the stool. His two assistants were standing off to one side. Harry watched with a small smile as the group of eleven year olds walked into the room, looking about with wide eyes, and for some, not a small amount of anxiety.

“Good afternoon, everyone. Please, come in and find a seat. Don’t worry about what you see here. Professor Weasley has assured me that nothing on display at the moment is anything to worry about. My name is Professor Potter and I’ll be your instructor for the year. Over to my left,” he indicated with his hand, “are my assistants for today. Ms. Evermore of Ravenclaw and Mr. Falmouth of Slytherin. It was my intention to take you on a little field trip to start us off, but I’m afraid if I went along we’d be at it all afternoon. So if you would please leave your books and bags and follow them they’ll take you on a little walk and we’ll talk about what you see when you return. Everyone ready? Ok, off you go.”

Harry watched as the two older students herded the twenty or so first years out the door and down the corridor. While he waited for them to return he spent some time doing last minute checks of the displays he intended to use for the next few weeks. Then he checked his notes and skimmed through a volume on magic that he had come across in the school library the week before. The sound of a number of footsteps told him that his class was returning but there was no chatter of any kind. The first years looked very subdued. The two senior students wore serious expressions and hovered at the back of the class. Harry looked at them and said,

“Thank you for taking care of that for me. You’re free to go.”

“Um, sir, if you don’t mind,” Falmouth began, “I’d like to stay.”

“So would I, sir,” Evermore added.

“By all means, please be seated.”

The two older students took seats at the back of the room. The first years were all seated by now and were looking at Harry. He took a breath and began.

“By show of hands, who saw names of family members in the memorial park?”

Five hands were raised.

“And who saw names of someone known to you or your family?”

This time a full dozen hands were raised.

“I have friends and family there myself. What you saw was the final resting place of the last fifty victims of a man who most know as Lord Voldemort, but whose real name was Tom Riddle. You’re probably too young to really remember anything about him, but my two assistants are all too familiar with his name and exploits. The important thing for you to remember is that as powerful and notorious as Tom Riddle was to become, his life started very simply and tragically. Your first assignment is to talk to the seventh year prefect of your house and have them tell you what they know about Tom Riddle. Write it down and be prepared to talk to me about when we next meet.”

He looked back at Evermore and Falmouth and said,

“Would you like to tell the class anything?”

“I would, sir,” Evermore said.

She then stood up and began to tell what she knew of those dark days. As a witch in a fully magical family she was all too familiar with the name and the fear that it brought. She calmly discussed what she knew and what she had come to learn. She also spoke of Harry’s part in the conflict. When she was done Harry looked to the Slytherin sixth year.

“Anything you’d like to add, Mr. Falmouth?”

"I don't think so, sir. I think she covered it very well."

"I thought so, too," he said with a smile. "Alright everyone, that will be all for today. But before you leave I know what you saw may have been a bit upsetting. But you should know that thanks to their sacrifice you all have a bright future ahead of you and that is cause for a few smiles, ok?"

He saw them brighten a bit and then waved them on. He then gestured for the two older students to come forward. When they were standing before them, Harry asked,

"So how were they?"

"Once we got outside they were very talkative and curious about what was going on. Once they got to the entrance to the park they got very quiet. I think a few of them had been there before, probably visiting with family. By the time we came out they all looked pretty much as you saw when they came back into the room," Evermore said.

"I remember what it was like when you took us through as first years. It made a real impression on all of us," Falmouth said quietly.

"Well, thank you for helping me out. I appreciate it," Harry replied.

"You're welcome," came the joint reply.

Harry had another interesting episode during one of his free periods on Wednesday afternoon. He had finished lunch and had taken a seat at the first year end of the Gryffindor table. There was a scattering of students at the tables but since it was still late summer, most with free time were outside. As he sat reading he felt eyes on him and he looked up to make eye contact with a young wizard in Hufflepuff colors sitting at the near end. Harry recognized him from his class and searched for name.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Rhys-Jones. How are you getting on?" he asked.

The boy, whose expression looked somber, just gave a shrug. Harry looked at him with a slight tilt to his head and then waved him over. The young wizard gave another little shrug and slid off the bench and came over and took a seat across the table from Harry.

"What seems to be the problem? You look rather unhappy," Harry said.

"I dunno, sir. I guess I'm just having a hard time getting used to being here, I suppose."

"How so?" Harry prompted.

"Well, sir, I'm muggle born, so it's all so strange," the boy said.

"I know what you mean. I was raised in a muggle family. My parents were a witch and wizard but they died when I was very young. I didn't know what to make of all this when I first got here. It helped that I made a couple of good friends right off, how about you?"

"That's been a little difficult. You see, I'm the youngest of four brothers and none of them are magical. People thought I was a little strange because odd things would happen around me sometimes. I guess it was the magic. I have an uncle no one talks about so I think it might be the same with him. Anyways, it was tough making friends because I was different. Even my brothers didn't want to have me around. My oldest would stick up for me if I was getting bullied but they didn't want to play with me or anything. When I got my letter it kind of made sense and I thought that I was going to be around people like me," he said and then got quiet.

"And?"

"It's been kind of tough because I'm muggle born and it seems most of the rest are either from magical families or at least half-and-half. It's like I don't fit again but from the other side if you see what I mean."

"All your dorm mates are from magical families, then?" Harry asked.

"Three are and the other is half-and-half."

“What about the girls?”

“The girls, sir?” the boy said with that all too familiar eleven year old look where girls are concerned.

“Mr. Rhys-Jones, one of my very best friends is, or I should say, was a girl from my class. She was muggle born and it took a little while but we became and remain very close. In fact, she’s married to my brother-in-law, who is also my best friend. Are there any muggleborns among the girls?”

“There might be one, I think, but I’m not sure, sir.”

“Well, that’s a place to start. You might also want to consider some of the clubs here at the school. The thing to remember, Rhys-Jones, is that you can’t expect things to come to you. You might have to go out and look for the answers yourself. Give it some thought and see what you can come up with. If you have any more questions or anything else that’s bothering you, come look for me, alright?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said, getting up and walking away, looking thoughtful.

That night he was home for dinner and was telling Ginny about what went on. Ginny looked at him and said,

“That poor little fellow. He’s having a tough time finding a place for himself.”

“I have an idea though that might help him specifically and maybe make a statement about the whole magical vs. muggle born thing,” he said and he laid out what he had in mind.

By the time he was finished she was smiling broadly.

“That sounds like a great idea, Harry. You might also consider introducing him to Abigail. She could give him a pretty unique perspective on what it’s like to feeling different.”

Harry nodded and thought it was a good idea and he made a note to discuss things like this with his wife. He was pretty sure it would make his job a lot easier. At the next session of DADA for the first years he sat on his stool and looked at the faces of his students. He saw Rhys-Jones sitting a few rows back, not looking much happier than the last time he talked to him.

“Ok, ladies and gentlemen. I have a new assignment for you. We’ll take some time to get you started and then you can spend the rest of the class working on it. First, who here comes from a non-magical family?”

Rhys-Jones, one Hufflepuff girl and three Ravenclaws raised their hands.

“Alright, you and you,” he said pointing at the two Hufflepuffs, “will work together, as will you three. You’re to write an essay about what it was like growing up in your family, finding out you had magic abilities and then coming to Hogwarts. Use today as the end point. I’d like to see about nine inches of parchment,” he said and then he looked at the two Hufflepuffs.

The young witch was looking over at Rhys-Jones with a shy smile and a little wave. The boy gave her a nod and crooked grin.

“Ok, next. How many of you come from mixed families, one parent of each?”

One Hufflepuff and two Ravenclaws raised hands.

“Good. Your assignment is similar. Tell me what it was like having one magical and one non-magical parent. Remember I’m not looking for anything specific here, just your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. You,” he said pointing to the singular Hufflepuff, “can limit your essay to six inches of parchment since you’re working alone.

“Now that should mean,” Harry continued, “that the rest of you come from fully magical families; in one way or another. Your assignment will be a bit different. From you I want a full nine inches on what it

was like growing up in a magical family in a mostly non-magical world. You can pair off as you'd like. Everyone understand what I want?"

A Ravenclaw witch raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"Pardon me, sir, but what does this have to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"That's a good question, but I'm not going to answer it right now. In fact, after this assignment is done, I might just ask you for the answer," he said with a smile.

The girl looked a little confused but nodded.

"Ok, get your heads together and see what you can do. You'll have a full week to complete this assignment so give it some thought."

Harry sat back and watched as the class broke up into little groups. He paid particular attention to the pairing of Rhys-Jones and the muggle born witch. Her initial shy smile quickly evolved into a great deal of talking as she began to scribble on some parchment, and eventually the boy began to add comments of his own. The other students were also warming up and a great deal of low level talking was going on. There was a lot of note taking and by the time Harry called the class to an end it appeared that a fair amount of headway was made.

"Alright, everyone. That's it for today. Remember, you have a week to complete your assignment. Make sure the name of each member of your team is written on the parchment. See you next time."

Harry watched them leave, with Rhys-Jones and the young witch having an animated conversation. Actually, the young witch was animatedly conversing while the young wizard listened. It didn't appear that he minded in the least. Harry smiled and followed them out of the room and towards the Great Hall for lunch. He made his way to the side entrance that was close to the Head table and

climbed the short staircase of the dais. Hagrid was already there and waved to him.

“Hullo there, Harry, or should I say Professor Potter?” he said with a big grin. “Got word from the Centaurs for ya. If’n ya think ya can make the trip they’d likes ya to come see ‘em on Sat’rday.”

“I think I can handle it, Hagrid. Just warn them it will be a slower walk then last,” he said with a grin.

“Cheers, Harry. I figger they’d be patient with ya.”

Bill walked up to his chair and said,

“Hello there gentlemen, how is everyone?”

“Doing well, thanks, Bill. How are Fleur and Victoire?” Harry asked.

“Doing well, Harry. Fleur says I am to give you a good looking over and let her know if you don’t look well. Little Victoire is starting to talk a bit. We think she’s saying ‘mama’ but we can’t tell if it’s with a French accent or not,” Bill said with a chuckle. “How’s my sister doing?”

“Good. She said the morning sickness is easing up so she’s happy. The owls are getting a work out taking messages back and forth with the builders. Mum is helping keep an eye on them.”

Harry noticed Hagrid was hanging on every word about how Ginny was feeling. Anything to do with his soon to arrive godchild got his immediate attention. Harry had the feeling that his first born was going to be a very well looked after child, much to his or her probable dismay. After lunch was over Abigail hurried up to the dais as Harry was coming down the staircase.

“Hiya, Professor,” she said with a big grin.

“Miss Westwood, how very nice to see you this afternoon,” Harry said formally and very seriously.

Abigail looked back at him with surprise. Then she saw the little smirk start and she started to laugh. Harry then leaned down and said,

“Hello, there little one. Ginny told me to tell you that she’d really like it if you could have dinner with us on Saturday. Kreacher is looking forward to cooking for more than just two of us.”

“Sure, Harry, that would be great. But with you around doesn’t Kreacher have to cook for three anyway?” she said with a perfectly straight face.

Harry started to laugh and just waved her on her way. By the time Saturday morning arrived Harry was anxious to have his meeting with the Centaurs. Ginny was going to accompany him as far as Hagrid’s hut where she was going to spend some time working on the text for the Magical Creatures book. One of the reasons she invited Abigail for dinner was to have a discussion about the book. Now that she had made a commitment to the project she was approaching it with her typical dogged determination.

As they strolled slowly along the path down to Hagrid’s hut the quiet took them by surprise. They had expected to be met by the booming bark of Norbie. They presumed that Abigail was down there already and they were right. Nearing the hut they could see that she was sitting on a stool near the back of the stone house sketching something that was inside one of Hagrid’s hutches. Norbie was sitting close by and he acknowledged their presence with some tail wags. Abigail was oblivious and Harry was glad the dog at least was alert. Hagrid came outside with his massive tea mug in hand and said,

“Morning, ya two. Good ta see yas. Harry, Bane told me for ya ta just start in and they’d meet ya on the trail. Cuppa, Ginny?” Hagrid asked.

“Thank you, yes, Hagrid. Harry? You’ll be careful won’t you?” Ginny said.

“Of course, love. Besides, I doubt the Centaurs would let anything happen to me,” he said with a grin.

He gave a little wave and began his walk into the forest. It was a little cooler under the trees but the late summer humidity lingered. He had gone perhaps a hundred feet when he was hailed from further into the shadows.

"Hail, Serpent King."

"Hello, Bane, it's very good to see you again," Harry said.

"Friend Harry Potter, the elders have asked that you attend the circle this day. There are things about the herd that would be proper for you to know."

"I'd be honored," Harry replied solemnly.

Harried began moving down the trail and Bane fell in beside him. With just the one Centaur it was easy for them to both walk the path. Bane looked down as he paced slowly at Harry's side.

"The injury causes you trouble, Harry Potter?"

"Some days are better than others, Bane. Fortunately today is a good day but I still have to be careful, especially on uneven ground."

The Centaur simply nodded his acknowledgement. They walked in silence for a few moments and then Bane spoke again.

"One had observed that your mate was not entirely pleased when your broomstick was returned to you. Did she find something amiss with its care, Serpent King?"

"No, Bane. My mate's issue was not with the care, but the caregiver. I am afraid that she can take offense far too easily where another female is involved, particularly if she thinks too much attention is being paid. It is an issue that has arisen from time to time," Harry replied with a smile.

"Ah, yes. It is much the same amongst we Centaurs. It is well to have someone so devoted but sometimes the strength of emotion can

cloud judgment. It is true in many things,” Bane said with a touch of sadness.

“I’m afraid you’re right.”

They continued on in silence until they reached the ring of large trees and Bane stepped ahead of Harry to lead him through to the dimly lit clearing. As before a large number of Centaurs were standing around the perimeter of the clearing. Unlike before a section of a tree trunk had been placed in front of where Harry was standing about half way between the edge of the clearing and the center, where the elder Centaur from the before was standing.

“Welcome, Serpent King. We are pleased to have you among us once more. The extent of your injury is known to us and we have provided as we could for your comfort,” he said while gesturing to the tree trunk.

Harry made his way forward, being careful not to let the cane push too far into the soft loamy soil of the clearing. It was about a yard across and somewhat less tall, the visible cut end had been smoothed.

“It is much more than adequate, sir, and your consideration for my condition is much appreciated,” Harry said with a slight bow.

“It is but a small thing in recompense for the service you provided to all on that dark night. It is known that Bane and Ronin informed you of our observations of your conflict with the abased creature and the outcome. Friend Hagrid told us of your chastisement of those responsible. These are deeds worthy of our profoundest respect. We are also aware that you are a rarity among the wizard folk, a humble human,” the elder said with a touch of humor in his tone. “As such we will not dwell on expressions of admiration but to simply give our thanks for your actions. We also know that you are a scholar of magic, not for the power it brings, but for the joy of the knowing and the desire to share and spread such knowledge. After much discussion, it was decided that as a demonstration of our thanks and admiration we would share with you the story of the herd. Much of what you will hear

has never been heard by one of your kind. We ask that you hold such things to yourself, Serpent King.”

“This is a magnificent gift and I hope I prove worthy of your trust. Perhaps at some time in the future we might discuss making more about the Centaurs known to the rest of the magical world. Perhaps that could be a path to better relations between us,” Harry replied.

“Perhaps, Serpent King and something to consider. But for now, please make yourself at ease and we shall begin.”

Harry found that he could sit at the edge of the ‘chair’ and take all the weight off his left leg. He settled in and gave his attention to the elder. What unfolded for Harry was a fascinating tale of a people who freely roamed the land. While never great in numbers they held sway over large swaths of land by virtue of their swift and tireless bodies. The telling of the tale was almost as absorbing as the story itself. The cadence of his speech held your attention without dulling the senses, regardless of how long you listened. Then another Centaur took up the story. This one was not as old as the first for he showed only a few signs of gray in his mane and tail. He told the story of the first coming of men to their land.

The Centaurs considered them creatures to be pitied for their small size and lack of sufficient legs. They covered the distances at a crawl it seemed to them. But they were clever and persistent and their numbers grew at an alarming rate. It soon became evident that in their quest for ever more living space men would soon destroy the Centaurs if something was not done.

So the Centaurs faded to the high country or lands where forests were deep and dark. They would emerge only on moonless nights and for those men foolish or unfortunate enough to come into those places, they were rarely ever seen again. And since they were no longer free to roam the lands they looked for other things to occupy their time and so they turned their attention to the skies and the stars therein. In the passing of eons they discerned patterns and those that were gifted enough could decipher those patterns into signs and so they became the skywatchers who linked the stars to the events around them.

A third Centaur took up the telling and her voice, although not so deep as a male, still carried easily to Harry and it carried more than a touch of sadness. She told how over time they discovered among men those who likewise sought signs in the night sky and it was thought that perhaps this would provide a link that might make for some form of coexistence and in the early days it was so. But then their arose among the humans wielders of magic who sought to hold sway over their own kind and other creatures as well and there was great conflict but as the non magic users were vastly greater in numbers, they prevailed and many among the witches and wizards were destroyed and the creatures associated with them were pushed back into the hinterlands.

“And so we come to this time, Serpent King. Small scattered herds known to those of wizardom but separate and proud to be so. Where the Goblkind would often engage in open revolt we have remained to ourselves for often has any attempt to treat with those on two legs resulted in treachery and hardship,” at this last she nodded to him once and stepped back.

Harry had sat as if spellbound. As he came back to himself he felt the stiffness that had settled in to his body. He took his cane and levered himself up from the trunk section. He looked at the eldest and with a half smile said,

“I beg your pardon, sir, but I need to walk out a bit of the stiffness.”

The Centaurs watched silently as Harry paced back and forth a bit, loosening up legs, particularly the left, as best he could. After a few moments he stopped and faced the assembled elders.

“You have shared with me a gift that has no measure. More than the sum total of the knowledge itself was the sense of kinship that lay under the words,” he said as he looked at the solemn faces. “For an orphan that has more meaning then you may realize. I can now more fully understand your concerns about sharing such knowledge. I, as I am sure most of my kind, had always thought that the Centaurs were somehow related to humans. Perhaps some crossing with horses somehow in the past. I don’t think that that is the way of it now. It

would seem that you are creatures of your own lineage and we simply share certain features in common. I will respect your wishes and hold what I've learned to myself."

The eldest Centaur walked towards Harry and came to stand directly before him. He reached out and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. His brown eyes locked with Harry's green.

"For one so young you show great wisdom and understanding, friend Harry Potter."

The use of his name surprised Harry but he tried not to let it show.

"It would appear we have judged rightly in more fully revealing ourselves to you and it is hoped that in the years to come such revelation will bear fruit for us all. We are done here now, Serpent King, for the time being. I will take it upon myself to bear you company to the forest edge. I would speak privately to you."

"I would be honored and pleased," Harry said.

He gestured for Harry to walk ahead of him until they cleared the ring of trees and stood on the trail. Then they proceeded to walk slowly side by side.

"I am known among the herd as 'eldest', friend Harry Potter. You may choose to call me that or you may use my true name, Zentese. I would like to ask of you a question."

"Certainly."

"Friend Hagrid has told Bane and Ronin that your time here among us is intended to be only a passing of a few seasons. Is that so?"

"Yes, friend Zentese, it is. The Ministry has granted me leave to teach for a full term here at Hogwarts and then I'm to return to my duties as Chief of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Yet this causes you much concern, does it not?" Zentese asked.

“Yes, it does,” Harry said. “Is it that obvious?”

“We watch, we listen, we learn.”

Harry just looked up and over at his companion and nodded.

“Would you choose to do otherwise?” Zentese asked.

“My heart tells me to remain to do what I love in a place that I love. My head tells me that I have a duty to the magical world to continue my task of protecting that world and helping set things right at the Ministry. There are those that think I could do more here to make that happen than by going back to the Ministry,” Harry replied.

“It is a terrible thing to be in conflict with oneself. Others may think they know the right path but you alone must be convinced for you must walk it. I can offer you no more wisdom than that which you already possess. But know that the herd would be pleased if you were close at hand,” the eldest concluded.

“Thank you, eldest. I would ask you a question if I may.”

“Of course, friend Harry Potter.”

“It was mentioned when my broomstick was found that it was sticking upright in the ground in the very center of the circle. Apparently some within the herd thought it had some meaning. Do you believe there is anything to that?”

The eldest made a sound that appeared to be a cross between a human laugh and the whinny of a horse. He looked down at Harry and said,

“It is true that Centaurs seek many answers from nature. The signs in the stars, the sounds in the forest, the behavior of the woodland creatures. Unfortunately far too many of us see that anything out of the usual is a sign. It may be that you, like other humans, have come to see the Centaurs as all wise, all seeing beings. I’m afraid that is far from the truth.”

He looked down at Harry and continued,

“Have you ever wondered, Serpent King, why it is that Bane and Ronin are always the ones who have met with you?”

“No, but now that you mention it I suppose I thought it had to do with the unease Centaurs have about being at the edge of the forest and that those two didn’t mind it so much,” Harry replied.

“There may be some merit in that thought. But it is not the reason. Bane and Ronin, will most likely in the fullness of time, take their place in the center of the meeting circle. They are two of the most wise, intelligent and capable of their generation. We hold no greater claim on wisdom than do humans or Goblins or any other creature. We are simply more selective of what we reveal to the wider world,” Zentese said, his lip curling in the first grin he had seen on any Centaur other than Firenze.

“The truth as I see it this, friend Harry Potter. Your broom fell where it fell because when you released it, it tumbled to the tree tops and the circular formation and sloping branches of the trees guided it there. The ground is soft and the tip easily buried itself. And there you have it. I could be wrong but I think not. Just as the stars fail to tell all, so it is with nature. Sometimes a falling leaf lands on your head simply because your head was in the way of a falling leaf.”

Harry looked at the ground as he slowly paced along the trail. He looked up at the Centaur who was regarding him in silence.

“I’ll make sure I keep that in mind, eldest.”

“We have come as far as I will go with you, friend Harry Potter. We will speak anon. Fare the well.”

“Farewell, Zentese. And thank you for a very interesting and enjoyable day,” Harry replied.

The elder Centaur nodded his head once in acknowledgment and then turned and headed back into the shadows at a trot. Harry watched till he couldn’t see him anymore and then turned and walked

the last hundred feet or so out into what he could tell was the afternoon sun. He saw Ginny hurrying over to meet him with Hagrid and Abagail watching from the door of the hut.

“My goodness, Harry, we were starting to get worried. You were gone for over six hours.”

“That long? I know it took some time to walk in and out but I hadn’t realized the story had taken that long to tell,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“What story is that?” she asked as she took Harry’s arm and led him over to the hut.

“Their story. Of Centaurs in general and this herd in particular. It was fascinating and the way it was told was spellbinding. I can imagine that that was what it was like for our ancestors sitting around a fire listening to a village or tribal elder telling a story or relating their shared history before they learned to write it all down. It was an amazing experience,” he finished quietly.

“Is it something that we should put in the book?” she asked.

“No. They specifically told me they don’t want it shared openly and I understand why. In fact, I don’t think it would be appropriate to put the Centaurs in that book. I think the same applies for the goblins and house elves. They are more than just magical creatures. Unless you decide to put in witches and wizards,” he replied looking at her seriously.

She looked back at him for a moment and then nodded her agreement.

Harry's Future, Part 37

"Alright everyone, let's get started. I hope everyone has their essay completed," Harry said from his stool at the front of his first year DADA class. "Yes? Good. Please hand them forward."

The parchment rolls were handed forward and Harry unrolled them and placed them face up on a desk that was in front of him. He looked at the titles and then leaned back and looked at the faces looking up at him.

"Now for the second and most important part of the assignment, we are going to read them aloud. Let me see. Here's one for you and one for you," he said as he handed rolls to students as he limped around the desks. "You'll notice that you're not getting your own essay back. One member from your team will read the essay that I've given you. Let's see, how about the Hufflepuff non magical team first."

As Harry and the rest of the class looked at the two, the young witch nudged Rhys-Jones and nodded to him. He stood up and held the roll in his hands and began in a halting voice to read what it was like to be young witches and wizards in a world full of muggles. As he read his voice steadied and got a little stronger. When he finished he sat back down and got a smile from his partner.

"Nicely done, Mr. Rhys-Jones. And a very well written essay. Who's next?"

This question was met with a number of hands raised. The youngsters read their way through every essay and since this was their double session they had plenty of time to discuss them. The one common theme that seemed to run through the comments was that no one really understood the issues that someone different from them had. Several of the magical born students thought it must be really tough for a muggle born to suddenly discover they were a witch or wizard and then have only a month or so to get used to the idea before coming to Hogwarts where everything and everyone was magical. Rhys-Jones' partner, one Catherine Biggsby, thought it must have been pretty hard to be magical kids and not be seen doing

magical stuff by muggles. The discussion became self sustaining and Harry just sat back and watched and listened. There was some real wisdom in what he was hearing. Eleven year old wisdom, to be sure, but it was there none the less.

When there was just a few minutes left he called them all to attention and asked,

“Ok, now. I believe I owe someone an answer to a question. Can anyone tell me what that question was?”

The same young witch raised her hand and said,

“I asked what did our doing the essay have to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Have you been able to figure it out yet?” Harry asked.

“Well, sir. I guess it’s made us realize that even though we grew up in different ways we’ve all had to deal with similar kinds of problems but I’m still not certain how it would help us against a dark witch or wizard.”

“Well said, Miss Willowby. You got the first part of it very well. As to the rest of it, it might interest you to know that Lord Voldemort used the rather arbitrary line between so called pure bloods and muggle borns as a way to gather followers and promote his ideas for pure blood dominance of the magical world and, he hoped, the muggle world as well. The things that were told to you by your house prefects gave you an idea about what had happened in the past and how Tom Riddle almost won. But did you know that Tom Riddle had no more magical blood then you or you?” he asked as he pointed at the children of mixed parentage. “His father was a muggle. But he chose to focus on his magical heritage and his decent from Salazar Slytherin. The ideas that you have just shared with each other completely escaped Riddle and eventually led to his demise. In order to defend yourself against the dark arts you must first be able to resist using them. Ridding yourself of the notion that you are somehow better then someone or someone is better then you simply by who

their parents or grandparents are or were is a good first step. Alright, that's enough for today. Off you go."

Harry watched as some very thoughtful young witches and wizards made their way into the corridor. They weren't the only ones being thoughtful.

Harry had to admit he was enjoying himself immensely. He found the interaction with his students every bit as satisfying as it had been when he was a seventh year and assisting Bill Weasley. His first years were enthusiastic and receptive to his ideas about the basis from which to establish a true defense against the dark arts. The carriage rides were taking most of the stress off his knee and having Ginny to talk to in the evenings made for a great end to the day.

They were finishing up breakfast on the second Saturday of the new term when an unexpected visitor arrived at their doorstep. It was Hermione. Even in the small house Kreacher insisted that he be the one to answer the door and announce whomever it was that was seeking admittance.

"Hermione Weasley wishes to see Master Harry and Mistress Ginny."

"Of course, Kreacher, have her come in," Harry said from the kitchen table.

"Hi, Harry, Ginny. It's great to see you again. How are you both doing?" she asked as she took a seat at the table.

"I'm doing great, Hermione," Ginny replied. "Would you like something? A cup of tea?"

"Thanks, that would be terrific. What about you, Professor?" Hermione asked.

"I'm doing pretty well, Hermione. The knee is not too bad since I'm not doing a lot of walking and the classes are going great. It's been a lot of fun so far."

She just gave him a knowing little smile that got a smirk in return and then she said,

“It’s the knee I came about, Harry. Here’s the name and address of the doctor I was telling you about. An appointment has been set for next Saturday at nine in the morning if that’s alright with you. My dad said he would be glad to meet you outside the Black house and drive you there. It’s on the outskirts of the city.”

“That will be great, Hermione. As to your dad, that’s really nice of him, but I could have gotten a cab or maybe even a Ministry car,” Harry said.

“My parents figure they owe you a favor or two, Harry. Yes, I know what you’re going to say but they still think of it that way so let them do this for you, please? Alright? Good,” she said as Harry first began to object and then accepted the offer.

“So, now that that’s settled tell me what’s been going on. It seems kind of strange with you two being here at Hogwarts and me not being with you. I sometimes think our seventh year was about the best time of my life,” she said a little wistfully.

Harry gave her a little smile and began to tell her what he had been up to. She got very excited when he mentioned what had transpired with the Centaurs. He didn’t give any details but explained that they had entrusted their life story to him. Ginny added some things about working on the books with Hagrid, Charlie and Abigail. Hermione found this very interesting.

“What a great idea, you two. There’s so much information between Hagrid and Charlie and having Abigail do the illustrations would make for a really terrific book. Do you think they’ll have you pose for the cover art for Charlie’s book on dragons?” she asked with a little grin.

“Very funny, Hermione,” Harry said as the two ladies started to laugh.

“Um, Harry?” Ginny said around a giggle.

“Yes, love?”

“It was already suggested but since you don’t appear to fit in with any particular type of dragon it was decided not to ask you,” she said.

“You mean there’s no place in the book for ‘draconis harrypotteris’?” he asked, his voice heavy with disappointment.

This got even more laughs out of the two. Later that afternoon someone else special put in an appearance as Harry and Ginny had suggested Bill and Fleur come to dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were more than happy to baby sit Victoire and in fact showed up around noon at Shell Cottage and all but pushed the parents out of the house by mid afternoon. Harry and Ginny were just as happy to have their guests there early.

As could be expected Fleur made a big fuss over Harry and gave him the once over, twice. When she was done she nodded her head.

“You are lookeeng much better, ‘arry. You are enjoyeeng your time ‘ere, yes?”

“Yes I am, Fleur. It’s been a very good couple of weeks so far,” he replied.

Harry had the feeling that no opportunity would be lost to remind him that Hogwarts was a good place for him to be. It was something he already knew. What he needed to do was figure out whether or not it was the right place for him to be.

As the four sat in the small parlor the discussion ranged from class work, Quidditch, babies and the impending vacation trip for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

“‘arry, before we left the cottage, Muum asked me to tell you again ‘ow ‘appy she ees to be going to my aunt and uncle’s ‘ouse and ‘ow much she appreciates you arrangeeng eet for them.”

"Hmm, I seem to recall that you had the most to do with it, Fleur. I just asked if it could be done and made sure that they had some nice surprises," Harry said.

Fleur shook her head and fixed Harry with a beady eyed stare. Harry ducked his head and warded off her evil eye with both hands. Bill and Ginny could only laugh.

"Harry, if I could get a bit serious for a moment, I'd like to ask you a favor if you would," Bill said.

"Sure, Bill, as long as it's not running in a race or anything."

"No, you should be able to handle it. I checked your schedule and you have a free period during one of my NEWT candidate sessions. Would you consider coming in and talking about what you went through during your NEWT? I know it was a tougher one then usual but I thought it might give them an idea of what to expect and some expert advice on getting through," Bill said.

"Sure, Bill. I'd be happy to," Harry said.

As he said it he could feel Ginny shudder at his side. He knew she was remembering how her NEWT exam ended and he put his arm around her and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"When would you like me there, Bill?" Harry asked.

"Your late Tuesday morning free period," Bill replied.

"I'll be there. I'll have to think back on it and make some notes."

"Just remember, 'arry. Theese ees about teaching them, so do not theenk that you are boasteeng. Tell them what they need to know," Fleur said seriously.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied solemnly and then gave her a slow wink.

She rolled her eyes and then laughed. Dinner was a wonderful if somewhat odd affair. Kreacher had gone out of his way to prepare a

sumptuous multi-course meal that was at odds with the simple surroundings of the small house. It didn't matter in the least to the diners, especially Harry who did his best to clean his plate, the serving platter and the vegetable bowl.

When he was finished he leaned back in his chair with a satisfied smile. He looked over at Kreacher who was cleaning up and said,

"Kreacher, my friend, that was about as good a dinner as I can remember. You keep this up and I might actually start putting on some weight."

"Master Harry is most welcome. It is Kreacher's pleasure to cook for Master Harry. And Master Harry's family as well," the little elf said with a smile.

"I can't imagine what it's going to be like once you get your house built with that big kitchen and dining room. Between Mum and Kreacher you should be able to feed half the student body," Bill said.

"Don't give Kreacher any ideas. But I guess we should give some thought to a housewarming. Maybe not all the students but something. We'll have to give it some thought, don't you think so, Ginny?"

"Absolutely, Harry."

Tuesday morning found Harry sitting on his stool in front of the class of DADA NEWT candidates. Bill was sitting off to the side and he was as interested as any of the students since he had never heard the details of Harry's test, only that it was long and tough.

"I'd like to start off by saying that since I only went through the test the one time I can't say that you'll face the same thing. In fact, I know that my test was intentionally made more difficult but at least you'll get an idea of the kinds of things you might have to face and what I did to overcome them. I don't believe any one obstacle I faced would be beyond the capabilities of a truly competent witch or wizard, but the way some were combined and the total number might prove daunting."

A Hufflepuff wizard raised his hand.

“Yes?” Harry responded.

“Excuse me for asking, Professor, but were they trying to make you fail?”

“I don’t believe so. I know that there were some at the Ministry that weren’t particularly thrilled with the idea of me wanting to be an Auror but I don’t think the Test Director would have allowed something like that. I think it was more that they were making sure that they weren’t going to be accused of going soft on me so that the ‘famous Harry Potter’ could become an Auror. Don’t forget, to pass the exam I only needed an Acceptable so if I didn’t make it all the way or had a few problems I could still get in.”

“Could I ask what your grade was, sir?”

“It was an ‘Outstanding’,” Harry replied evenly.

This got a number of raised eyebrows and nods. Harry then began to describe the types of obstacles that he faced and what techniques he used to overcome them. He talked about the environment that was created with alternating darkness and bright light, heat and bitter cold and seemingly random changes in direction.

“I think at the very bottom of it all is not so much a test of your particular skills so much as it is a test of your confidence in your abilities, how well you can maintain your composure under stress and to a certain degree, your mental toughness, your determination. The way it was structured it was no academic exercise but more a simulation of what real encounters would be like,” Harry said and then looked over at Bill. “Professor, was that similar to your experience with your NEWT exam.”

“Yes, although not to the degree and severity that you’ve just described,” Bill said and then he looked at the class. “What Professor Potter has said is very much to the point. It’s not enough to know a particular charm or how to defeat this creature or that curse. You have to know you can do it under difficult situations with all manner of

distractions and have the confidence that it will come out right in the end. With that in mind as the year goes on we will be conducting a series of simulations in the Room of Requirements to help prepare you.”

Harry nodded and then continued,

“I have to admit to something and I hope you take it in the spirit that it is offered. By the time I had gotten to my exam, I had been through so many situations and so many encounters that what I experienced in my test wasn’t all that bad. It was long and it was exhausting but it wasn’t particularly harrowing I’d guess you’d say. Now, I’m not suggesting that you go out and find some evil wizards and dark creatures to fight in preparation for your test, but I do suggest that you approach these upcoming simulations seriously and with the intent of learning about yourself as much as learning the magic. You do that and I’m sure you’ll do very well with your exam. That’s about all I have, so why don’t we start with the questions.”

There were quite a few. Harry was happy to see that the questions were serious inquiries into the details of the things he faced and what techniques he used. The students wanted information and not just to engage in some form of hero worship. He particularly enjoyed several questions that challenged him on why he chose one response over another when faced with a particular threat. He was pretty sure that when the time came these witches and wizards would acquit themselves quite well. When the time came, Bill dismissed the class and they all made their way to the Great Hall, still talking and asking questions. Before they broke up to head to their tables Harry told the students he would be available for further discussions both formally in classes and informally during off hours. As he and Bill made their way to the head table Bill looked at him and said,

“Well done, Professor. I think they learned a great deal today and with some more work this year they should be very well prepared for their exam.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said with a small smile. “I think having had a steady and capable DADA instructor for all but one year has a lot to do with that.”

"You're too kind, Professor," Bill replied with a little bow.

"Not at all, Professor," Harry replied in kind and since they had reached the steps up to the table he gestured for Bill to go ahead. "After you, Professor."

"Oh, no, after you, Professor," Bill replied, a small grin beginning to show on his scarred face.

"Are you sure, Professor? By the time I get up there the food will have gotten cold," Harry responded with a smirk.

"No problem, I assure you, Professor. I can just wave my wand and float you right to your seat," Bill offered, his smile growing.

"Now wouldn't that be a sight," Harry said and then he started to laugh and climbed the few steps one at a time.

Bill followed behind laughing as well. Professor McGonagall was already seated and had watched the entire exchange with raised eyebrows. As the two brothers-in-law came to their seats she said,

"And what may I ask was that all about, Professors?"

"Oh, just a couple of overgrown schoolboys playing at being professors, Headmistress," Bill said with a smile.

The Head just shook her head with a small grin. Privately she wished she had more such schoolboys on the faculty. Harry looked along the table and a thought occurred to him.

"Excuse me, Professor McGonagall. I was just wondering why we never see Neville Longbottom here. Isn't he staff, more or less?"

"Indeed he is. However, it is my understanding that either he Disapparates back to the Cauldron to eat or Mrs. Longbottom brings him something herself."

Harry nodded and smiled a bit. He looked out over the rapidly filling Hall and out of nowhere another thought occurred to him. He looked back at Professor McGonagall.

“Excuse me, Professor. But what ever happened to Peeves? I don’t think I’ve seen or heard about him since I came back for my seventh year.”

“We have no idea, Harry. He hasn’t been seen since the Last Battle. At first we thought he was hiding somewhere until the smoke cleared, as it were. But after a while we began to grow concerned so the castle was searched top to bottom. We checked with all the ghosts and portraits and no sign of him has ever turned up. I must admit he was never my favorite Hogwarts resident but I wouldn’t wish him any harm either. We just don’t know where he got to.”

The rest of the week progressed according to schedule and soon Harry found himself preparing to leave for his doctor’s appointment on Saturday morning. He was dressed in muggle attire and he was leaving his wand at home. He assumed he wouldn’t run into anything that would require that level of conjuration. He kissed Ginny good bye and Disapparated to the porch of the Black House. He went down the steps and onto the pavement just as a small four door sedan pulled up to the curb nearby. Mr. Granger waved him over.

Harry walked slowly over to the car and opened the door and carefully folded himself into the front passenger seat. He shook hands with the muggle dentist.

“Thank you very much for this, Mr. Granger. I hope I’m not putting you out or anything,” he said.

“Harry, it’s the least we could do for you. It shouldn’t be too bad a drive on a Saturday morning,” Hermione’s dad said with a smile.

He pulled away from the curb and began to negotiate the traffic. It had been a number of years since Harry had been in an unmagicked automobile and he had a sudden realization. In his entire life he had never been in the front seat of a car. He leaned back into the seat and enjoyed the ride. It took perhaps half an hour and then they were

pulling into the car park of a moderate sized building. There were only a handful of other cars.

“Doctor McLeod is an old friend, Harry. When the wife and I were first starting out we shared space in the same building. A number of his patients were and still are sportsmen and often whatever mishap brought them to him for treatment also required dental repair. We treated more than a few who had casts on their legs or arms.”

They parked the car and Hermione’s father led Harry inside the lobby to the lifts. They rode up to the third floor and when the doors slid open Harry could see they were across from a large suite of offices. Mr. Granger opened the door and gestured Harry to go in ahead of him. They were in a moderate sized waiting room that contained far fewer chairs than the often crowded room he was used to at St. Mungo’s. Mr. Granger waved him into a seat and he went up to speak to the woman behind the receptionist counter. Harry couldn’t hear the conversation but he saw the woman look at him and then nod to Hermione’s dad.

“Mr. Potter, the doctor is ready for you. If you’d just come this way please,” she said.

Mr. Granger smiled and said he would be waiting here for Harry when he was through. Harry smiled and followed the woman down a corridor. She opened the door to a room and said,

“If you would, Mr. Potter.”

Harry made his way into the room and the woman followed in behind. She gestured for Harry to sit down and she picked up a clipboard that contained some forms.

“My name is Amanda Williamson, Mr. Potter. I’m Dr. McLeod’s surgical assistant and sometime receptionist. You are our only patient today so the regular receptionist has the day off.”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized. I hope I’m not putting you out,” Harry said, feeling a bit uncomfortable.

“Not at all, Mr. Potter. We do this a couple of times a month. Many of our clients have hectic schedules and we do this to accommodate them. Now, I just need to get some information if you don’t mind.”

And she began to ask questions about Harry’s age, height and weight, any health issues, next of kin and so on. Then she asked Harry to sign a couple of pages and finally instructed him to change into one of those omnipresent little gowns while she fetched the doctor. When she returned she found Harry sitting on the examining table with his hands folded in his lap. She saw the look on his face and said,

“Yes, I know, silly things aren’t they. Doctor, this is Mr. Harry Potter.”

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. I’m Doctor McLeod. The Grangers are old friends and I’m pleased to meet you,” he said, holding out his hand which Harry took. “Although I’m sure you’d rather it be under more pleasant circumstances. I understand your left knee is rather bugged up. Would you tell me about what happened?”

“As much as I can, sir. You see, I work for the government and it was injured while I was on duty,” he said watching as the Doctor’s eyebrows rose a bit. “The first time I fell on it in, I guess you could call it a semi controlled crash,” and he used his hands to indicate the shallow dive that resulted in his crashing to the ground in the low brush. “That’s where I got these burns as well,” he indicated. “The second and more serious injury came when I was a little too close to a building that collapsed. I got hit by some debris.”

Both the Doctor and his surgical assistant were regarding Harry with more than a little interest. The big round glasses, the unkempt hair and slight build were not in any way consistent with what they thought should be the look of someone being in those situations. Harry looked back at them with a studied neutral look on his face. He had been giving this moment some thought and he decided since he did work for the government, in a way, that he would use that as a cover.

“Well, I see. So two traumatic injuries, the second worse than the first. Let’s take a look and then we’ll take some pictures.”

The doctor felt around Harry's knee and made some notes on a chart and then added some scribbled lines near the bottom.

"Alright, Mr. Potter, if you'd go along with Ms. Williamson she'll take you to our imaging area and we'll do some x-rays and MRI scans. I'll go out and have a chat with Mr. Granger, I haven't seen him since he and the missus returned from Australia."

"Yes, sir," Harry said as he gingerly got off the examining table and went to follow the assistant.

"Oops, not so fast, Mr. Potter. We'll take you for a ride in this," she said as she pulled a wheelchair from the hallway.

Harry was about to object but then shrugged and sat down and allowed the surgical assistant to wheel him down to another area of the suite. Going through another door brought him to the first of two rooms, separated by a single door. A large machine sat near the far wall. A middle aged man in plain medical garb, often referred to as 'scrubs', was waiting. He took the clipboard from Ms. Williamson and then looked at Harry.

"Ok, guv, up ya come. If ya'd sit up 'ere and make sure yer knee is right over this section 'ere. Now ya can lay back," the man said and then he draped Harry with a heavy protective blanket. "Ok, now stay right still and I'll be back."

The imaging technician and Ms. Williamson left the room and then there was a brief buzz from the machine and they were back. The technician repositioned Harry several times to get images from different angles. After the last shot he was back and Harry said,

"Don't you have to change films or anything?"

"Oh, no sir. We're all up-to-date 'ere. It's all digital, no more processing film. Just snap a picture and it goes into the computer and right to the Doc's desk. If you'll come with me it's time for the MRI."

Harry followed the man into the next room where a larger machine was located. Harry had to lay down and he was slid into the large ring

section of the machine and he was told to lay back and relax because this would take more time. But it wasn't all that long before the technician came through the door and said,

"Alrighty, Mr. Potter. Yer all done. Ms. Williamson will take ya back to the exam room. It's been a pleasure."

"Thank you."

Harry was wheeled back to the original exam room and he was left by himself for a while. Then he heard footsteps approaching and the Doctor and assistant came through the door.

"Well, Mr. Potter it is a bit of a mess but I've seen worse. Had one fellow in here, about the only thing holding his leg together was the skin around his knee."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked, slightly horrified.

"He was an amateur rugby player, ran into some fellow that weighed about twenty stone and they fell together, the big one on the other's knee. They said the sound of it going away could be heard all over the field. But back to you. You have fragments of cartilage and I believe some bone floating about in there as well as tears in the ligaments and tendons. I would also say that the ligaments have been stretched more than a little bit as well," the Doctor said.

"Here's what I'd like to do," he continued. "I understand that you are a teacher in a boarding school up north. We'll set a date for right after the present term ends and we'll do an arthroscopic procedure where we make small incisions and use small equipment and viewers to clear out the rubbish and repair the worst of the damage. Sew up the tears and so on. This way we get most of the damage taken care of with the least amount of disruption to your leg. You'll be braced up again for four to six weeks, then we'll bring you back for further evaluation. At that point we'll see about beginning physical therapy to tighten things up. I'd prefer that to additional surgery."

"If that's what you think is best, then that's what we'll do," Harry replied.

“Excellent. Why don’t you get dressed and we’ll get you set up with that appointment,” the Doctor replied.

Harry shook hands with the doctor and watched him leave. Then Ms. Williamson said,

“For the arthroscopy, Mr. Potter, we use an outpatient surgical clinic not far from here. I’m sure Mr. Granger knows the location. We’ll make all the arrangements and notify you of the time and date,” she said as she was writing something on his chart. “I’d imagine you’re looking forward to getting back on your broom once all this is taken care of.”

“Excuse me?” Harry said evenly.

“Flying on your broomstick. The famous Harry Potter, star seeker for Gryffindor House at Hogwarts. My youngest brother is a wizard, Mr. Potter. The only one ever in our family. He was a seventh year when you were in your first year. He used to write to me the whole time he was up at school. The last year, you were all over his letters. After he graduated he used to keep tabs on what was going on. After that hideous Voldemort re-emerged my brother went into hiding, he was so scared, being muggle born as you folks call it. In many ways I have you to thank for making sure my brother could lead a full and happy life. Thank you for that,” she said the last looking straight at Harry, a small smile on her lips.

“It wasn’t just me, you know,” Harry said quietly.

“I suppose, but I’ve read the full story. My brother lent me a book that has it all down. Plus you’re the only other wizard I’ve ever met so...” she shrugged. “But don’t you worry, Mr. Potter. Your secret is safe with me. We’ll get you back in one piece and flying high again very soon. I’ll leave you now to get dressed,” she smiled and then stepped outside.

Harry shook his head as he got up and slipped off the examination gown and got himself dressed. He wondered how many muggles were out there that knew about the magical world and managed not

to let it slip. Then he laughed to himself and thought that many probably had and others just thought they were crazy. When he was done he left the room and walked out into the waiting area.

"Harry, so, how did it go?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Well, it's as bad as we thought, but the doctor seems pretty sure he can get it knitted back together again. They are going to schedule something right after we finish the fall term."

"Excellent. Well, rest assured we'll be available to help you get around."

"That's very kind of you, sir."

"Not at all, son. It's the least we could do for you," Mr. Granger said with smile.

As they made for the door, Ms. Williamson watched them from the other side of the counter and gave Harry a little smile and nod. He responded with the same. The drive back to the Black house was uneventful and he left Mr. Granger with handshakes and more thanks. He was back to Hogsmeade in a matter of moments.

"Harry, sweetheart. How did it go?" Ginny said from the kitchen table.

"It went well, love. Let me sit down and I'll tell you all about it. Hello there, little one. Keeping Ginny company?"

"Hiya Harry, sorta. We're talking about the book, too," the young witch said with a smile.

Harry moved over to the kitchen table and sat down.

"The doctor said the knee is as bad as Dr. Antimony thought. But he also thought he could get most of the damage taken care of with a procedure that doesn't require cutting up the whole knee. We can do it right before Christmas. I'll be in a brace for a few weeks more and then they'll look at it again and then I'll start some form of physical therapy. He wants to avoid any big surgery."

"Hmm, I can agree with that, I think. You have enough scars as it is, my hero," Ginny said with a smile.

"Just as interesting though is the doctor's surgical assistant knew who I was," Harry said.

"What do you mean? Was she a witch?" Ginny asked.

"No, her youngest brother is a wizard. Apparently the only one in the family. He was a seventh year when I was in my first. He used to write to her all about school and I guess I was in some of the letters. He went underground when Voldemort came back. She thanked me for helping him live a full and happy life," Harry said and he couldn't help but shrug.

Abigail leaned over and gave him a little tap on the arm.

"That's from Ginny since she can't reach you," she said with a grin.

Harry just smiled. He frowned a bit and looked toward the front door.

"Is all that noise coming from the students?"

"Yup, first weekend for Hogsmeade. The place is packed," Ginny said.

"We're we that loud?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm sure. Not that we cared," she said with a smile.

"So, what do you say we have some lunch and then take a walk down to see George? I'd imagine he'd be up here for the big day," Harry said.

"Kreacher will have lunch ready in just a few moments more, Master Harry," the little elf said.

"Thanks, Kreacher."

After they finished eating, the three went out into the street, their robes just enough to ward off the slight chill of late September. The street and pavements were crowded with students and Harry received a number of shouted 'hellos' and waves. He returned them with smiles and waves of his own. Ginny and Abigail got more than a few greetings themselves. Despite the close quarters students, took care not to jostle Harry as he maneuvered through the roaming packs of witches and wizards. He noticed that there were also a number of paired off boys and girls walking hand in hand. He looked down at Abigail who was walking to one side of him, her arm hooked in Ginny's, their heads close in whispered conversation.

As much as his fatherly instincts made him a little edgy where boys were concerned he was also a little worried about how she didn't seem to have any close friends or a boyfriend for that matter. He understood that she was different but wizards and witches were different by definition so he wondered what the issue was. He also wondered about the relationship between his ward and Tom Medford, if it could be considered as such. The sound of a dull roar interrupted his thoughts as they neared the shop of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

Students were backed out the door. Harry noticed a little remodeling had been done. There was now a door for entry and one for exit. Harry, Ginny and Abigail came to a stop at the end of the queue for those trying to get in. A student sensing someone behind him turned and when he saw Harry standing patiently he edged aside and tapped the wizard in front of him who likewise turned and did the same. In short order Harry had been able to move forward into the store proper, thanking the students as he moved past them. Ginny and Abigail grinned as they followed along in his wake.

"Harry," he heard George call out. "Good to see you, Professor. Try and come up to the front. That's it ladies and gents, please let the Professor through."

Harry waded through the mass of bodies like a tug in Portsmouth harbor. Ginny and Abigail were like small barges being towed along behind. When he made it to the counter, George flipped up a section and let them through.

"Hi, Harry. I heard you were to the doctor today. Everything alright?" George asked.

"It's not at the moment, but they figure they can get it pretty well fixed. They'll do it over the holiday break. Business looks good," Harry said.

"Yeah, the first Saturday is always the worst, or best, depending on how you look at it. Go in back and I'll be there in a few."

The three made their way back into the store room/office and found places to sit down. Harry and Ginny in chairs and Abigail on a box. Harry was looking around the collection of boxes and bags, some on the floor, some on shelves. It looked a little disheveled.

"I'm thinking they need Mum or Hermione to come in here and get the placed organized," he said.

"It does look a little untidy, doesn't it, sweetheart. But it looks like they might be having staffing issues. I think at least one of the clerks out there is from the Diagon Alley store," Ginny responded.

Just then George came back.

"It's nice to see you guys, but I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to talk long. As you saw it's a madhouse out there. I had to bring two people up from London to handle the volume. We don't do enough business during the week to justify additional full time staff and it's hard to find part time help up here," he said, looking harried.

"Would it be possible to hire a sixth or seventh year for just the Saturday? Maybe two, working split shifts so they aren't gone all day," Harry suggested.

"Hmm, that might not be a bad idea, Harry. They'd be able to leave when all the other students go back to the school. I think I'll go put up a sign right now. Thanks, brother," George said with a grin.

"You're welcome, brother, and I think we'll leave you to your customers. We just wanted to say hi. Let us know when you and Angelina feel up to a visit," Harry said.

“Sure thing, Harry. Most likely in a couple of weeks, I’d think,” he said as he headed back to the chaos.

Harry nodded to his two ‘ladies’ and said,

“I think it would be a good idea to leave by the back door. I don’t want to have to fight my way out through that crowd.”

“Good idea, Harry. They do a nice job of getting out of your way but an accident can still happen,” Ginny said as she held her hand out to Abigail.

They quietly left via the back door, making sure it locked when they shut it. They walked up the alley and back into the slowly thinning crush of students. Again there were many greetings and waves as they made their way back to the house. As they closed the door behind them, Harry let out a big breath.

“Wow. I don’t recall it being that big of a crush when we used to come down.”

“That’s because we were causing the crush and having a good time being out of the castle. You tend to overlook things like that when you’re a kid,” Ginny said with a grin. “Now that we are mature adults we are more observant of such things. And not nearly as tolerant,” she finished with a laugh.

Harry just smiled and went to sit in the parlor. Abigail came in and sat down across from him while Ginny went into the kitchen to see about some tea. Harry looked at his ward.

“So, little one, you didn’t want to stay out and spend time with any of your friends?”

“I dunno, Harry. It’s not like I haven’t been out there dozens of times before. Plus I don’t have any really close friends to spend time with. If you and Ginny weren’t here I’d probably be back at the castle working on some art for the book. That’s what we were talking about when you came back from the doctor’s. Don’t worry about me like that,

Harry. I'm in a lot better shape than I might have been, thanks to you. I'm happy," she said with a bright smile.

He smiled back and then waved her over to sit next to him on the small couch and when she did he gave her a hug and kissed the top of her head.

"I can't help it, little one. I'm being parental at the moment," he said.

Ginny came in at that time bearing a tray with tea and biscuits. Harry looked up and said,

"Is Kreacher alright, Ginny?"

"He's not here right now, Harry. While you were gone he popped up to the castle to visit his friends and get some advice on a new recipe he was thinking about. So I get to play homemaker for a little while," she said with a grin.

She placed the tray on the little table and they served themselves. Abigail looked at Harry as she sipped her tea, her face thoughtful. She set the cup down and nibbled a biscuit and then said,

"If you don't mind, Harry, there is something I wanted to ask you and it's kind of what you were talking about a minute ago."

"Ok, ask," Harry said.

"Um, I was thinking that for the Halloween Ball that I might invite Tom to come up. If that's alright with you?" she said, biting her lower lip a bit.

"Hmm, really? I wasn't aware that Tom was much of a dancer," Harry said evenly.

"I don't know if he is either. It's just that we had a nice time talking at your birthday party and with you up here all year I thought it would be a chance to get to talk to him some more," she replied her eyes a little wide as she looked at Harry.

"What do you think, Gin?" Harry said.

"I don't see that it would do any harm, Harry. As long as you promise not to talk work with him," Ginny said from behind her tea cup, trying to hide a little smile.

"Ok, I guess it would be alright, little one."

"Thanks, Harry," she said brightly.

Harry smiled back and looked at the petite young lady, who's face was showing signs of maturity that were at odds with her small stature. Harry's 'little girl' was growing up, was in fact almost an adult. He looked across at his wife who was regarding him with a warm smile and a tilt to her head. He just smiled back, but refused to add the shrug.

Harry's Future, Part 38

'Professor Potter'. The phrase had different meanings depending upon who was considering them. For Professor McGonagall it was the realization of a hope six years in the making, ever since a certain seventh year demonstrated an affinity for his subject and his students that could only be described as 'natural'. For Professor Weasley it meant the professional satisfaction of having a collaborator and partner that could greatly enhance the effectiveness of his own DADA class and produce some truly well qualified witches and wizards. Personally it meant his 'brother' was out of harm's way for at least a school year. This point of view was shared by the other members of the Weasley clan to include Professor Potter's wife.

To the students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry it meant a number of things. They saw him as a strange mix of legend and reality. The legend was a towering figure of power, will and almost superhuman endurance. The reality appeared to be an averaged sized young man approaching his mid twenties who bore the scars of many encounters with dark forces but always seemed to be smiling and was ready to talk about anything that was of concern to a student. They were also well aware that the smiling countenance could quickly disappear to be replaced by a green eyed scowl if someone was displaying inappropriate behavior but that happened only rarely.

To the Professor himself it meant the opportunity to do something he truly loved and would gladly continue to do for a lifetime if he could only bring himself to accept that in doing so he wouldn't be 'letting down' his community. But he had time to consider and while doing so he was going to give his current, if temporary, assignment his all, and enjoy himself immensely in the process. At the moment, the Professor was sitting at the junior end of the Gryffindor table during a free period reading through some homework from his sixth year Applied Magic class. Harry wondered if maybe it would be a good idea to include a penmanship class for first year students. He knew that Hermione thought his own handwriting was poor but he swore at least one submission looked like a chicken had been dipped feet first in ink and allowed to wander on the parchment.

His attention was diverted to a pair of young students several places down concentrating over a small wizard's chess set. As he watched he was forced to conceal a wince as the white player made a move that doomed him to defeat in two, maybe three, moves. He thought Ron needed to come up and conduct some seminars, but perhaps that was taking it all too seriously. He went back to reading and two moves later he heard, "Checkmate".

Harry looked over at the white player and said,

"You should have moved your queen's side knight instead of the king's. It would have blocked the black queen and put more pressure on his king."

"Oh, ok, thank you, Professor."

Harry smiled and went back to doing his homework.

One other observation that the students made was that it seemed Professor Potter liked to talk to some rather unusual, well, 'people'. He was the only member of the faculty that was ever seen talking to the Centaur, Firenze. It was also fairly common to see him talking to this or that portrait in the lower corridors of the school. It might have been a few passing remarks or what appeared to be a fairly involved conversation. During one of his seventh year classes a student screwed up the courage to ask him about it.

"Are you all concerned that Professor Potter is becoming Professor Potty? One too many knocks to the head?" he said with a grin.

A few of the students gave nervous little laughs, others looked uncomfortable. Harry smiled back and shook his head.

"No, it's not like that. Let me see if I can explain. Have any of you ever been inside the Head's office?"

One student raised her hand. Harry recognized her as the school's Head Girl.

"Can you tell me what you saw in there?" he asked.

“Well, sir, I guess you’re referring to all the portraits of former Heads?” she asked.

“Yes, I am. As you are well aware, the subjects of those portraits can talk to us. Many of them have quite a bit to tell us. Since my seventh year I’ve had the opportunity on a number of occasions to discuss problems I was working on with Professor Dumbledore and his predecessors and found them to be immensely helpful. Likewise Firenze and I go back a long way, my first year here in fact. And quite frankly, these folks are fun to talk to. You should try it some time.”

During the next few days Harry noticed a bit more interaction between some of the students and the Hogwarts artwork. He was glad to see this because, he found out, the portraits were feeling a bit left out.

Harry was feeling rather content with how things were progressing. His first years were very enthusiastic, he was spending time with Bill and the second years and his new course was proving very interesting and challenging. His students had taken him seriously when he asked for their help and he was receiving quite a lot of input on what they liked, disliked or thought could be better. There was something else he was feeling as well. He had always thought of Hogwarts as someplace special. Despite the difficulties he had experienced from time to time it was the place where he had found himself, that gave him his sense of identity, of self. He had often referred to Hogwarts as a second home, after the Burrow, but it was the first place that had ever given him a sense of home, of belonging.

Those feeling were now starting to intensify. As the carriage would pass through the gates he would look out and examine the grounds in minute detail. He would look at the castle with a sense of satisfaction at how well the scars of the Last Battle and then the less damaging attack of the hybrid had been repaired. It annoyed him that his damaged knee was keeping him from freely wandering the upper halls. He was in a sense, developing a very proprietary attitude towards the school. On more than one occasion a student or group were reminded, kindly but firmly, that they should take more pride in the school and do a better job of picking up after themselves.

After the latest such episode he stopped and thought about it. He wondered what was at the center of this growing sense of ownership. As he thought about it that dry cold voice in the back of his mind said,

“I have fought and killed to protect this place. Several times. I have family and friends here and will have more in the future. This place is mine.”

Harry stood there and blinked at the strength of feeling that was conveyed in such a dry, emotionless voice. It was true that dragons were very territorial, Charlie had told him, and perhaps that was driving these feelings. That night he discussed it with Ginny.

“So, you’re telling me you’re hearing voices?” she asked.

“Come on, Ginny. I’ve heard lots of voices over the years. You know that. At least this one is me. A part of me.”

Ginny looked at her husband from across the kitchen table with that little squint and tilt of her head.

“You know, sweetheart, I should know by now that nothing about you should surprise me but sometimes you still manage it. I guess there’s nothing really wrong with you feeling that way but I wouldn’t let it get to far out of hand. I imagine that Professor McGonagall might not take it well if you started to tell her how to run the school.”

“I don’t think it’s like that, Ginny. It’s more like the place itself, not so much what goes on inside. I imagine if she decided to tear something down I’d probably feel differently. It’s kinda weird though. The Burrow has been a home to me but I don’t feel that possessive about it.”

“Remember what the voice said, Harry. You’ve never really had to fight for the Burrow. There was that one time with the housebreakers but that wasn’t much of a fight and they didn’t die. Think of all the times you’ve been in a fight at Hogwarts. It seems like almost every year except our last. And then this last time with the hybrid. It does make sense. Like I said, just don’t let it get away from you.”

Harry nodded in acknowledgement but it was something that would occupy his thoughts more than a little over the following weeks. But it did not prevent him from enjoying his time. The club matches for Quidditch had begun and he and Ginny could be found in the stadium on Saturday mornings rooting the flyers on in a non partisan fashion. It appeared that the flyers had been in touch over the summer and they were wearing coordinated team colors, although the robes had a definite homemade look. Bill and Charlie Weasley were in evidence as referees as was the occasional familiar face from the camp. Harry yearned to be out there with them.

That dry voice in his mind would also occasionally suggest that it would be good to stretch his wings and he was sorely tempted. That idea and the feeling of territoriality combined to form an idea that emerged a couple of weeks before the Halloween ball was to be held. The idea waged a friendly war with Harry's self effacing nature but eventually won out and he went in search of his friend Hagrid for some assistance.

In the week leading up to the Ball, Harry confronted an issue common to all teachers, an under performing student. In Harry's case it was a fifth year wizard in his Applied Magic class. The current session was coming to a close and he had decided it was time to get to the bottom of it.

"Mr. Madsen, I'd like to talk to you for a few moments after the class is over."

"Yes, sir," the young man said, a certain resignation in his voice.

"Alright, everyone, that's all for today. See you next time," Harry said.

When the other students had left Harry waved Madsen to the front of the room. He indicated a desk in front of him. The young wizard took his place at the desk and looked at Harry. Harry regarded him for a moment.

"Mr. Madsen, to put it simply, I'm disappointed in the work I'm seeing from you. It's not on a par with the obvious intelligence that you possess. I've talked with some of the other professors and they tell

me it's been the same with their classes over the last four years. Would you care to explain?" Harry asked.

"I'm I failing, sir?" the young wizard asked, but sounded like he already knew the answer.

"No, your work is passable, if barely."

"Then I don't see what the problem is, sir. If I'm doing work that will get me a passing grade, that should be good enough," the boy said.

"Is that all you think you need to worry about, just passing? It's not going to give you many options for your future," Harry said, trying to read the expression on the boy's face.

"Sir, I'm muggle born from a rich family and an only child. I don't really need any options."

"Then why are you even here, Mr. Madsen?" Harry asked.

"When I was little, weird things used to happen around me. When I got my letter, it explained why but my parents didn't really want me being a wizard all my life, they just wanted me to learn enough to be able to keep things under control. I don't even plan on taking OWL tests or coming back for my sixth or seventh year."

"Then why in the world did you sign up for my class? It's all about learning to use magic in a comprehensive way with an emphasis on defense against the dark arts. If you have so little real interest in magic why are you here?" Harry asked.

"I thought it would be more interesting than just taking more of what I've already been through," the boy said matter-of-factly.

Harry stood up and walked around to step on to the platform that his desk rested on. He sat down and looked at some parchments on his desk then he locked eyes with Madsen.

“So you believe your family’s wealth will provide you with all the security you need, financial as well as physical. Is that it?” Harry asked quietly.

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Madsen. Did it ever occur to you that your family’s wealth just might make you a target and a command of basic magic could provide you the best defense for you and your family?”

As Harry was saying this, a small book seemingly launched itself from a nearby bookcase and sailed over the young wizard’s head, missing him by mere fractions of an inch. The boy ducked. Without blinking Harry continued,

“You see, Mr. Madsen, a threat or attack can come from anywhere, at anytime. Being prepared and aware might be the only thing that saves you or someone close to you.”

This time a model of a large bat that was hanging from the ceiling transfigured into the real thing and swooped down at the boy who narrowly avoided it by diving under his desk. The bat returned to its place on the ceiling while the desk rose up and glided sideways.

“On your feet, young man,” Harry instructed. “Apparently, you haven’t paid much attention to anyone who discussed how Voldemort and his followers used stealth and deception to advance their plan to dominate our world. All your money would mean nothing if someone like that took it into their heads that you, your family or your riches were of interest to them.”

The boy went rigid as Harry silently incanted ‘immobulus’ and then got up, dismounted the platform and came to stand in front of the frozen youngster.

“Do you see how easy that was for me? There are others that could do the same, especially if they weren’t sitting right in front of you. Have you ever heard of the ‘imperious’ curse?” Harry asked.

The boy’s eyes moved up and down in the affirmative.

“Well, I’m glad you seemed to have listened at some point. Then you realize that without your knowing it a witch or wizard could compel you to do all manner of things once they had you under their power. That was one way Tom Riddle got otherwise uncooperative people to do his bidding. Not as many as you might think, but still there were some. They could take control of you, your fortune, everything. Just how safe are you, Mr. Madsen?”

Harry could see that the boy was terrified. He released him and said,

“Sit down, please.”

Visibly shaken the young wizard sat down in the chair but Harry left the desk where it was. He pulled his stool up so he was close enough to reach out and touch him. He once more fixed the boy with his green eyes and smiled a bit.

“Do you know much about me?” he asked.

“Only...only what people have mentioned or talked about in class,” Madsen replied in a small voice.

“Ok, I realized I’ve managed to scare you and that wasn’t really my intent but now that I have your attention, I want you to do something,” Harry said as he took out his notebook and pencil stub.

He wrote out a brief message and handed it to the boy.

“I want you to take this to the librarian. She’ll provide you with some things to read. When you finish them come back and see me. But don’t take too long. It’s important that we get this straightened out. Alright?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ok, off you go.”

Harry watched as the boy stood up and then hurried, but didn’t run, from the room. He shook his head and went back to his desk. Harry

didn't realize what events his assignment would precipitate. When the young wizard presented the note to the librarian the following day, she provided him with the book published by Luna Lovegood's father as well as books that related Harry's first encounter with Voldemort as well as articles gleaned from the Prophet on his later exploits. When she inquired as to the need the boy explained his encounter with Professor Potter minus the more embarrassing details. While he was reading some of the material the librarian sent a note to the Headmistress who arrived shortly thereafter and was seen taking a seat across from the boy and holding a quiet conversation.

They left the library together shortly thereafter and the young fellow spent a very informative time in the Heads office. Apparently, the former Heads, professors all at one time or another, warmed to instructing the lad on what could safely be called their favorite topic. His last stop was the following morning after his DADA class. He sat and listened as Professor Weasley filled him in on what he thought was appropriate details of Harry's personal life as it related to the current issue. It was a very thoughtful young wizard that entered Harry's classroom that afternoon. As the class progressed, Harry noticed that Madsen's attention never wavered. His eyes followed Harry wherever he went, unless he was jotting down notes, something he rarely did up to this point. Harry dismissed the class and waited to see if Madsen would remain, which he did.

"So, Mr. Madsen. What can you tell me?" Harry asked.

"Well, sir. I can certainly understand why you feel the way you do. I guess it all seemed so distant when it gets talked about in a classroom. But you really did live all that stuff."

"Yes, I did, and I have the scars to prove it," Harry said with a smile. "The point I'm trying to make to you is that you may never have to do any of the things that I've had to do. In fact, I sincerely hope you never do. But it would only have to happen once to completely destroy your life, if you're not prepared to deal with it. It's like when you get into a car and you fasten your safety belt. Over your lifetime there will be thousands of rides were you didn't need it and if you're very lucky you never will, but it would only take one time where you didn't and needed to and you're done. So what now?"

"I think it might be a good idea if I paid attention more and put more effort into my work," Madsen said.

"That's all I ask. And if you need any help, I'm always available."

"Yes, sir."

Harry smiled as the fifth year stood up and with a single nod turned and left the classroom. Now if only he could do something about the sixth year with the writing chicken, Harry thought to himself. So it was late in the afternoon of Halloween day that he was in a decidedly good mood. He and Ginny were getting themselves ready for the dinner and dance and although he wasn't going to be able to do any dancing this year the prospect that his knee was going to be fixed to some credible level, he was content. He was also looking forward to what he had arranged with Hagrid who had been behaving like the world's worst co-conspirator with winks and grins whenever they crossed paths.

When it was time to leave they heard the thestral pulled carriage arrive at the front door. Kreacher held the front door for them and bowed them out. Ginny was wearing the green robe that she had worn as Hermione's matron of honor. Harry wore the formal robes he wore for their wedding. Ginny's pregnancy was only barely showing and under the robe it showed not at all.

"Well, I must say, Professor Potter. Arriving at the castle in our own carriage is very posh."

"Don't get used to it, Mrs. Potter. As soon as the leg heals the carriage disappears. I'll need the walk for the exercise," Harry said with a grin.

"That's ok, Harry. By then we'll be in our own house and I'll have other concerns to deal with," she said laying a hand on her abdomen.

Harry just smiled and gave her a brief kiss then lent her a hand up into the carriage and then he carefully followed. They enjoyed the brief ride to the front door, sitting side by side and holding hands.

They slowly mounted the stairs and entered the castle, where they saw many students making their way to the Great Hall and they were hailed by a number of waves and greetings. Arm in arm they went down the corridor that brought them to the side entrance near the dais and tables for the faculty and guests.

As usual they were greeted by the radiant Mrs. Weasley who practically flowed down the short staircase from the dais. She wrapped Ginny in her long arms and held on tightly as they exchanged whispered confidences. Then it was Harry's turn. He received the usual hug and kisses on the cheek and forehead but before Harry could respond in kind she wrapped him tightly in her arms again and didn't appear to want to let go. Harry looked over at Ginny who just shrugged. Harry held on to his 'big sister' and started to rub her back. He felt her head shift so that it brought her mouth to his ear and she whispered,

"Eet makes me very 'appy to see you 'ere as Professor 'arry Potter. I weesh eet would always be so."

With last squeezes she finally relented and stepped back, her smile wistful and her eyes shining. She then hooked her arm in Ginny's and led her up to the table where Bill sat watching the exchange. Harry followed along and sat down after shaking hands with Bill. Harry looked out over the rapidly filling Hall. He caught sight of Abigail sitting at a table with some other sixth year Ravenclaws, with one chair conspicuously empty. As if sensing his gaze, Abigail turned and looked up at the table. She grinned and got up and hurried up to the dais. She was quickly up the steps and exchanging hugs with Ginny and Fleur from their chairs. She then approached Harry and stood at a respectful distance. They had agreed that there would be no hugs while within the school.

"Hiya, Professor Potter," she said with a grin.

"Little one, how are you doing tonight?" Harry asked with a smile.

"Just great. And in case you're wondering, Tom said he'd be here after work so I assume that will be in an hour or so."

Harry just nodded and smiled a bit. Ginny and Fleur leaned towards each other and exchanged a few words. Fleur looked at Abigail and then Harry with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. Harry was studiously avoiding meeting her glance and he concentrated on Abigail when he noticed something. It was obvious that his ward had made use of the makeup kit and lessons that Fleur had provided. It gave her a decidedly grown up air despite her short stature. Harry nodded again and said,

“Have him come up and say hello when he arrives. I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Ok, sir, see you all later,” she said and then turned and hurried down the steps.

“arry, your smile ees as false as a dark weezard’s oath. What ees the matter weeth you?” Fleur asked.

“I find the prospect of Abigail entering this stage of her life moderately disconcerting,” Harry said in a low strained voice. “The fact that she has been receiving such expert guidance hasn’t helped much either.”

Fleur’s eyebrows shot up and then she started to laugh, that low throaty chuckle that Harry recognized as her ‘evil’ laugh. He gave her his best green eyed glare. With a wave of her hand she said,

“arry. You are too young to be such a grumpy old man.”

Bill coughed to cover a laugh and decided it was time to change the subject. He asked Harry,

“What was all that with Madsen last week, Harry? He and I had a little chat about you after class one day. He said the Head ‘suggested’ it.”

“She did?” Harry replied, a bit shocked. “That wasn’t what I had in mind. I was trying to find a way to get through to him. To try and get him to see that it was important that he put more effort into his education. He thinks because he comes from a rich muggle family he

only has to worry about keeping his magical abilities under control. I suggested he think of his ability as a last line of defense should his family's wealth attract the wrong kind of attention but it just wasn't sinking in. I thought if he knew more about my adventures, I'd guess you'd say, he might take what I was saying more seriously. I just told him to have the librarian give him some articles and books to look at. How'd you get involved?"

Bill's scarred face cracked with a smile.

"Apparently the librarian notified the Headmistress who then collected young Madsen and introduced him to the other occupants of her office. After that she sent him to me. Whatever your intention, Harry, it seems to be working. I've noticed he does pay more attention and his last assignment showed noticeable improvement."

Harry just shook his head while Ginny reached over and patted him on the forearm, her smile barely keeping a fit of giggles at bay. Harry looked out over the growing crowd of students. It appeared to him that the Ball was working its magic for he noticed that the students generally appeared more well dressed than during previous events. The image of Ron Weasley and his absurd formal robe for the TriWizard Ball came to mind. He was glad that life had taken a more dignified and fair handed turn for his best friend and brother. As he scanned the Hall he noticed a familiar figure appear at the main entrance, who was likewise scanning the gathering of students. Harry watched as Tom Medford looked, then spotted Abigail and made his way towards her.

She had spotted him as well and they met about half way, she taking his hand in both of hers, as she often did with Harry. They stood that way and chatted for a few moments and then Tom looked up to see Harry. He said something to Abigail, who released his hand, and he proceeded toward the dais, alone. Harry stood up and began making his way to the steps.

"Harry?" Ginny started.

"Don't worry. I just wanted to say hello and talk some business," he replied with a smile that was only partly forced.

Ginny just gave him a look. He didn't even try to look at Fleur and he was reasonably sure that Bill was either grinning or trying to hide one. He slowly descended the stairs and waited at the bottom. As Tom approached he could tell he was a bit apprehensive.

"Good evening, sir."

"Tom. It's good to see you. How have things been going?" Harry asked.

"Fairly well, sir. Mr. Maxwell told me that if you requested, he and Mr. Milligan would be happy to come up and brief you on current events. Mostly it's been small incidents. The Patrollers are doing well and training is proceeding for those that Ms. Muntab has an interest in."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'll think about whether I want someone to come up. I know they must be busy. How about our friends in Europe?"

"Nothing new there, sir. It seems as if any lieutenants that old wizard had must have gone into deep hiding. Mr. Milligan's contacts on the continent haven't come up with anything new."

"Well, I can't say I'm happy we haven't dug them out but at least they aren't causing any visible trouble," Harry mused.

"Yes, sir," Tom said and then looking even more uncomfortable he continued. "Um, if you're concerned in any way with my being here, sir, don't be. Before I left I was assured that if I behaved in an unacceptable manner I would, and I quote, 'not be able to run far enough, no matter how long I lived, to escape the consequences'. It seems that Miss Westwood has many champions," he concluded with a wry grin.

Harry looked at the young man who had been so eager to be his assistant and be at the center of things that were happening at the Ministry. Harry knew how invaluable Tom had become to himself and the department in general and his growing reputation for hard work, dedication and trustworthiness. He took a breath and let it go. Then he smiled a bit and said,

“Try not to let it bother you. Enjoy the evening. I’ll send an owl if I feel I need to talk to Maxwell or Milligan.”

“Yes, sir, and thank you, sir.”

Harry gave Tom a friendly cuff on the arm and turned back toward the stairs. As he made his way back to the table he met Fleur’s eyes and just gave her a little crooked smile. He sat down and looked at his wife who said,

“Well, he didn’t look too terrified so I can assume you were nice to him.”

“There wasn’t any need for me to terrify him. It appears the Aurors already took care of that for me. And I realized I’ve trusted him to do a lot for me before so I don’t have any reason not to trust him now. So let them enjoy the Ball and I’ll worry about things when I have something to worry about.”

Ginny smiled at him and gave his arm a squeeze. The music was starting and Bill and Fleur excused themselves. Harry watched them descend the stairs and then looked over at Ginny.

“Sorry, love.”

“Oh, Harry, don’t give it a thought. Besides, I’m not so sure I’d be all that crazy about having you spinning me around the dance floor in my condition. It hasn’t been all that long since I regained control of my stomach so I’m content to watch the others have fun tonight,” she said with a smile.

So they watched as Bill and Fleur caused their usual stir on the dance floor with some of the older student couples trying to keep up. As usual the first and second years were huddled in gender specific groups on either side of the room and the middle years were eyeing each other nervously with the occasional brave souls venturing forth.

“There they go, Harry,” Ginny said in a delighted whisper.

Harry looked out to see Tom and Abigail move out onto the dance floor. Tom was only slightly taller than Harry so the couple wasn't too terribly mismatched and Abigail carried herself with more maturity and confidence of late so the age difference didn't appear as marked. Harry watched them start off and then purposefully directed his attention elsewhere. He didn't want to appear as if he was watching their every move.

As he let his eyes roam around the Hall, including the other end of the dais, he made eye contact with Hagrid who gave him a big wink. Harry gave a small half smile in acknowledgement. Now that his mind was no longer concentrating on the issue of Abigail and Tom he felt that gentle urging to spread his wings and get some exercise. 'Patience' he counseled his other self but the prodding only subsided a bit. It also awakened a serious growling in his stomach.

After two dances Bill and Fleur waved Harry and Ginny down so that they could help themselves to the buffet. Harry deliberately left his cane behind, getting a scowl from Ginny in return, because he knew he was going to need both hands to handle his plate. In fact, a third hand would have been very helpful but he managed with just the two. Apparently he was under surveillance by the kitchen staff. When he approached the buffet table for the faculty a platter magically appeared in front of him, saving him the necessity of making a second trip. His concerns for the evening were pleasantly diverted by the task of working through the heaped platter in front of him

Harry went through what would have equated to his first serving with ravenous determination. Once the initial craving for food was satisfied he was able to sit back and take a more leisurely approach to the rest of his dinner. Ginny, of course, was used to it by now as was Bill, having shared the faculty table with Harry on numerous occasions. It had been a while since Fleur had been around Harry while he was eating and she regarded him with wide eyes.

"Mon dieu, 'arry. You weell drive the 'ouse elfs eensane tryeeng to keep up weeth you."

“Actually, Fleur,” Ginny began, “Kreacher tells us that Harry is a favorite with the kitchen staff. They take true pride in keeping the great Harry Potter well fed.”

They all laughed except Harry who managed a smile around a mouth full of food. The evening passed pleasantly with more and more students getting up the nerve to dance. Even a few of the first and second years tested their courage and balance. Harry was genuinely happy to see the students enjoying themselves and adding pleasant memories. He fervently hoped they wouldn't have any more bad ones, beyond the dragon attack. This line of thought reawakened the urge and he finally decided it was time to do something about it.

“If you wouldn't mind excusing me, I think I'd like to take a small walk outside and get a breath of fresh air and walk off a little of this dinner.”

“Do you want some company, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“That's ok, Gin, I won't be long. Just a quick stroll down towards Hagrid's. See if any of the Centaurs might be about,” he said with a perfectly straight face.

“Ok, sweetheart, but be careful.”

Harry smiled and then taking his cane, made his way down the stairs and then out through the side door of the Hall. They watched him leave and then Bill and Fleur looked at Ginny. She shrugged a very Harry like shrug and said,

“Don't ask me, but something tells me he's up to something.”

The subject of their discussion had made his way out of the castle and was moving as quickly as caution would allow towards Hagrid's hut. As he approached he could hear Norbie start to bark but when he called out a greeting the big dog whined a bit and then settled down. Harry found his Firebolt leaning against the side of the hut. He took it and replaced it with his cane and in a moment he was mounted and lifting off. The new brace allowed him to bend his knee enough to sit properly but he knew he wasn't fit for anything fancy so

he just kept it straight and level, staying just above the trees to avoid being seen in the light of the half moon.

In a few more moments he was passing over Hogsmeade and climbing into the hills beyond, finding that spot where he had gone so often to practice the change the year before. He tucked his broom away in the cleft of an old tree and then walked to the center of the clearing. He envisioned the dragon and in two heartbeats, he was filling the small area and gingerly testing the ability of his left rear leg to handle stress. The lift off would sting but nothing compared to what he felt when he had first been injured.

With a lunge and the sweep of wings he was off the ground and climbing skyward. The now stronger sense of the dragon wanted to bugle in pure joy at being airborne once again but Harry didn't want to show his hand just yet. Instead he gained altitude and allowed himself the pleasure of some dips and rolls and dives. Finally, he climbed again and began his approach to the school grounds. As he passed over Hogwarts the first signs that something unusual was about to happen were seen.

In the kitchen, all work stopped and the house elves all looked in the direction of the front of the castle. Likewise all the castle ghosts, who had joined in the dancing, although about half way to the ceiling, stopped and began drifting towards the front entrance. Abigail, who had been sitting and talking to Tom suddenly stiffened and looked towards the ceiling.

As Harry swept in over the lake and pulled up to sail over the castle he let out with a bellow loud enough to rattle the glass in the many windows. Some of the students began to shout, fearing a repeat of last year's horrors but Abigail, having spelled her throat, shouted out that it was the dragon that had rescued them. She grabbed Tom by the hand and pulled him out of the Hall towards the doorway. Some of the students went to follow but those that didn't looked up and saw the dark bulk of the massive dragon sail overhead thanks to the magic of the Hall ceiling.

Ginny, Fleur and Bill looked up and then at each other. Ginny snorted and then said quickly,

“And he swears he’s not a showoff.”

Outside Harry continued his overflight of the school grounds. Occasionally he would let loose a blast of white hot plasma into the night sky, temporarily lighting up the ground beneath. He could see a large group of students standing on the lawn in front of the castle looking up at him. He smiled a devilish little smile to himself and dove towards the crowd, swooping in low so that his great talons passed no more than a dozen feet above their heads. A number dove to the grass. Finally, having had a good stretch of the wings he circled above the castle and came to a hover, his rear talons just touching the ridgeline of the roof. He bellowed out the dragons’ challenge to anyone that would contest his claim to this place and the warning that he would fight to the death to protect it. This was punctuated by a dazzling blast of plasma that lit up the night sky.

Having enjoyed the flying time, and having made the statement he felt he needed to make, he dropped down towards the front lawn again and rocketed out over the lake, his great clawed feet barely above the water. In a moment he was gone from sight.

Perhaps a quarter hour later Harry came walking up the trail from Hagrid’s hut at a leisurely pace. He could see that a few students were still outside scanning the night sky. They didn’t notice him walk past. When he entered the Great Hall through the side door he was met by Bill, Fleur, and Ginny. His wife wrapped him in a big hug and said quietly in his ear,

“Show off.”

He simply pulled back and smiled down at her. Before they could say anything else, Abigail and Tom came up as did a number of other students.

“Sir, did you see it? Was that the same dragon as last time? Abigail says it was,” a six year witch rattled out.

“Yes, I did see it. I was down by Hagrid’s hut and got a very good view. Yes, it was the same dragon that came to the school’s aid last year,” Harry said.

“Why did it come back? And what was it doing above the castle?” a younger wizard asked.

“Well, I’m no expert, but my brother in law, Charlie Weasley is and we’ve discussed dragons from time to time. If I’m not mistaken, having fought and killed another dragon here, this one figures that this is its territory and it was making a claim on it tonight. Warning others to stay away. It looks like Hogwarts has a very large guardian angel. And believe me, that’s a very good thing to have.”

Harry's Future, part 39

Harry flew high above the Scottish landscape. The sun was bright and high in the sky but at this altitude the air was briskly cool. With his wings spread wide he would catch the thermals rising from the dark, hilly landscape only to fold them back to plunge down and then pull out to skim along the treetops. As he began another leisurely climb to altitude he heard a familiar voice calling his name.

"Harry. Harry!"

The great head swung on its long, muscular neck looking for a slight redheaded figure on a broom but there was nothing nor no one to be seen, yet the voice persisted.

"Harry, sweetheart, wake up," Ginny spoke softly but insistently.

The blue, cloudless sky began to dissolve and was replaced by a pair of warm brown eyes and a smile every bit as bright as the sun had been in his dream. After blinking away the sleep he looked around and said,

"Oh, good morning, love. I was having a great dream. I was flying somewhere up beyond Hogwarts on a beautiful sunny day."

"I can imagine," she said, looking pointedly at the book lying in Harry's lap as he reclined on the big couch in the living room of the Burrow. "You told me that you were going to go right to sleep after I went upstairs last night. You still have your glasses on for goodness sake."

"Sorry, love. I hit an interesting spot and couldn't stop. Guess I dozed off anyway."

The book in question was titled, "The Flight of Dragons" written by a team of researchers over a hundred years ago and was suggested to Harry by Charlie Weasley. It was the morning of Christmas Eve and Harry and Ginny were at the Burrow for a combination holiday visit and recuperation. Harry had his knee surgery two days before and Mrs. Weasley insisted they stay for the entire holiday break. Harry

had learned his lesson well and didn't even think to beg off. Kreacher was in residence to assist with the holiday cooking and Harry could already smell breakfast in the making. His stomach growled loudly.

"Oh dear", Ginny giggled. "The beast awakens."

"I guess even flying in my dreams burns up energy," he said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"How's the knee this morning?"

"It's feeling pretty good, just a little sore. It was really quite amazing. I'm glad I stayed awake through the whole thing. Of course I couldn't see anything but I heard the discussion. It wasn't the worst they had ever dealt with, apparently, but still pretty bugged up, as the doctor would say," Harry said and then looked thoughtful. "You know, Gin, he said something interesting after they were done."

"What was that, Harry?"

"After seeing what was in there and the damage that was done, I mean really seeing it, he said he couldn't figure out how I was able to walk without crutches. He said it really shouldn't have been able to support any weight at all."

"What did you tell him?"

"I just said I come from a pretty tough family," Harry replied with a smile. "But it made me think. You know Oliver Wood told me he was unconscious for a week after getting hit in the head by a bludger in his first Quidditch match. You would have thought it would have cracked his skull. I've seen him and Angelina take some nasty falls during matches and my crashing through the railings that time. I should have had broken bones, not just bruises. I wonder is there something about witches and wizards that makes them physically tougher, more resistant to serious injuries?"

"I don't know, sweetheart, but if there is I'm sure glad of it. Considering all the beatings you've taken, if we weren't I wouldn't have you here today," she said with a warm smile.

Harry returned her a smile and let her help him up off the couch. He was back to using crutches per the doctor's orders and made his way to the bathroom down the hall. When he came back out he could see that breakfast was on the table and Ginny and the cook's chief assistant, Abigail, were already seated.

"Good morning, Professor Potter, sir," Abigail called out in her airy voice accompanied by a wide smile.

"And a good morning to you, Miss Westwood, ma'am."

Abigail giggled and watched as Harry swung his way carefully into the kitchen and maneuvered gingerly into a chair next to Ginny. Within moments they were joined by Mr. Weasley and Charlie, who had arrived the night before. Eleanor was due to arrive at anytime. Harry had a surprise waiting for her. He had asked Kreacher to bring the elaborate wizards' chess set to the Burrow. He and Ron had already played a few games and the chess pieces were pleased to be out and about.

"So, little one, I understand you were out to the new house yesterday. How's it coming?" Harry asked.

"It's gorgeous, Harry. I mean I know what it was supposed to look like but to see it for real and be able to walk up and touch it. The whole of the exterior is complete except for the landscaping. They're working on the interior now and it doesn't look like much but you can see where it's heading. I'm sure you're going to love it," she said.

"I'm sure I will and I want to thank you again for all your help. You and Ginny have given us all something very special," he said with a smile.

Abigail smiled first at him and then at Ginny and then Harry's two guardian angels began filling up his plate from the platters on the table. He looked at them with raised eyebrows and said,

"Gee, you two are going to spoil me with service like this."

"You deserve a little spoiling, sweetheart. Eat up, I know you're hungry," Ginny said with a smile.

And eat he did. He barely let up when Eleanor came into the kitchen and when it came time for his hug it was exchanged in one armed fashion from his chair. Before returning to the task of demolishing his second helping he pointed to the living room and the clearly visible chess set.

"Oh, Harry, you didn't," she cried with delight and hurried into the room.

They could hear the shouted greetings to 'fair lady Eleanor' from the various nobles amongst the pieces and the banging of weapons on shields from the pawns. After promising to return to them soon she came back to the table and sat down next to Charlie.

"It's a good thing those pieces are only a few inches tall," Charlie said. "Otherwise I might get jealous."

Eleanor laughed and gave Charlie a kiss on the cheek.

"I have to admit, all that adulation could go to a girl's head," she said with a laugh.

Bill and Fleur were due after lunch and would stay for dinner and Christmas day. The rest of the family was expected for Christmas breakfast to include Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Angelina's parents had accepted an invitation for Christmas dinner as well. Molly Weasley, Kreacher and Abigail had been working since the start of the break to get things ready. Harry couldn't remember seeing his 'mum' happier.

After breakfast had been concluded, with little in the way of leftovers, the table was cleared and Harry worked his way over to his mum and gave her a big hug, thanking her for filling him up, once again.

"Always a pleasure, my dear, and you know that. Now go sit yourself down and take care of that knee. You don't want to undo the doctor's hard work now do you?"

“Yes, ma’am, and no, ma’am,” Harry said with a grin.

He swung his way back to the couch but settled himself in a semi sitting position so he had access to the chess board. Eleanor pulled a chair up to the other side and then looked at Harry.

“Any preference?” she asked.

“Well, it looks like both sides want you. I’m feeling a little left out,” he said with a grin, acknowledging the clamor on the board.

“Good people,” Eleanor began with a twinkle in her eye. “The day has just begun and there will be many opportunities for combat and valor. This raucous display is most unseemly, m’lords. Let us conduct ourselves with chivalrous behavior. The first contest will be as arranged and when concluded the sides will be reversed. Are we agreed?” she asked with a wink towards Harry.

The black king, who Harry would command for the first match looked at Eleanor and then his opponent.

“The lady is both fair and wise. Fair of face as well as mind. We will bow to her wisdom.”

“Agreed,” the white king replied. “Prepare, my people, for the contest is at hand.”

“This is just too much fun, Harry. I love talking like this,” she said with girlish glee.

Harry smiled and nodded his agreement. He gestured for her to begin and the contest was on. Harry and El played three games before lunch. Harry won two. With his knee on the mend and a contented state of mind due to a successful first half of term he was able to give the games his full attention. His mind did begin to wander a bit near the end of the third game as his breakfast began to wear off and that was all El needed to finish him off.

“Well played, Harry. I think you would have swept me but you started to drift around the middle of the last game,” Eleanor said over the sounds of the pieces resuming their places on the board.

“Thanks, El. I was getting hungry and it gets hard to concentrate.”

“Sir Harry!” the black king shouted.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“If thine hunger is causing your thoughts to wander, I would recommend you cease now and take what refreshment you may. When Sir Ronald arrives you will need all your wits about you, lest the contest end in full rout.”

“Sound counsel, my liege,” Harry replied. “We will do as you suggest for I see the board has already been laid. We will return anon.”

Eleanor rose to the cheers of her recently victorious pieces and offered Harry a hand up from the couch. When they were both standing he looked at her with a lopsided grin and said,

“You’re right, it is kind of fun to talk that way.”

They both laughed as they made their way to the kitchen table where soup and sandwich makings were laid out. Harry worked his way through three sandwiches and two bowls of soup. Charlie and Eleanor watched in amazement as he scraped up the last bits of veg and broth from the bowl in front of him.

“Has anyone weighed you lately, Harry?” Charlie asked.

“Uh, yeah. They did some of that just before the surgery. Came in a little over eleven stone. Why?”

“It hardly seems possible is all. The way you eat you should weigh twice that.”

“Mass equals energy, remember? Gotta be ready if I need to make the change,” he said with a grin.

Charlie laughed and Eleanor just rolled her eyes. Ginny just sat back and smiled then said,

“Of course if he ever gets stranded on a desert island he’s going to last about half a day and then starve to death.”

“How could I get stranded, love? I would just have to go dragon and fly home, maybe snack on a whale on the way,” he replied with a perfectly straight face.

This got everyone laughing. Ron and Hermione arrived around mid afternoon and the two best friends settled into a game almost immediately while the women sat by the fireplace and talked, mostly about the house and the anticipated arrival of the first Potter child.

“I have to tell you, Ginny,” Hermione said. “There’s quite a buzz around the Ministry about the baby. It’s not unlike what was said about you and Harry getting married. People are taking it as a sign of better days after all the misery of Voldemort.”

“Good grief. It’s been what, almost six years since then. You’d think people would start to ease a bit wouldn’t you?” Ginny said.

“I don’t know, Gin. I think with the dragon attack at Hogwarts it’s still pretty fresh in everyone’s mind. It wouldn’t surprise me to find people thinking that Voldemort isn’t really dead after all,” Hermione replied.

“Oh, you can rest assured that he’s dead all right.”

This was said by Mr. Weasley as he walked out of the kitchen with a cuppa in hand.

“I spoke to Kingsley Shacklebolt not too long after the battle had taken place. He told me that all the bodies of the Death Eaters and Voldemort himself had been taken to the Ministry and thrown right through the Veil. No one was taking any chances, nor did they want any burial place to become some sort of shrine or rallying point for any sympathizers.”

Mr. Weasley took a seat next to his wife.

“But you are right, Hermione. It will take some time for people to get past the idea of having Riddle and his gang lurking in some shadows somewhere and any shock, like that dragon attack, only adds to the case of nerves. That’s why they look for signs like your first child, Ginny, to give them hope for better times.”

Ginny rested her hand on her expanding abdomen and gave a small smile. Their conversation was interrupted by a clash of arms and shouts as Harry’s queen’s knight did battle with Ron’s king’s knight. Ron and Harry had joined in, encouraging their respective pieces, even though it was Harry’s move to win. When the inevitable occurred they laughed and high fived each other over the board. It was a gesture Harry had taught Ron years earlier to acknowledge a particularly hard fought exchange. As the room quieted down the conversation resumed.

“Do you think the new house will be done in time for the baby’s arrival, Ginny?” Eleanor asked.

“It’s quite possible. When we were out yesterday the foreman told me that if the weather doesn’t get too bad over the next few months we could be in by the end of March and I’m due the middle of April so it could happen.”

Further conversation was curtailed as the kitchen door opened and Bill, Fleur and Victoire arrived. As Fleur and Bill were welcomed by Mrs. Weasley rushing from the living room to the kitchen, little Victoire made straight for Harry on her now very steady legs. She stood at the side of the couch Harry was sitting on and held her arms up imperiously.

“Unc ‘arry, hug,” she said, her face very serious.

Harry smiled and reached down and lifted his niece up and held her tight. Her little arms gripped his neck tightly and he felt a little kiss on the cheek. When she let go he sat her down on the couch, leaning against his left leg where she sat happily holding his hand.

“Our ‘arry ees quite the charmer, no?” Fleur said as she and Bill entered the living room and sat down opposite Harry.

“I suppose I just get on well with small children is all,” Harry responded while at the same time giving Victoire a little tickle that set her to laughing.

“Sir Harry, your attention if you please. The scoundrels are on the move,” his king bellowed at him.

“Opps, sorry,” Harry said as he tried to focus on the game.

Four moves later he was done. Ron looked at him and said with a smirk,

“Sorry, mate. I guess it’s hard to play good chess when everyone wants your attention.”

Harry gave Ron a mock glare and said,

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you arranged for it, Mr. Strategist, or should I say evil genius.”

Ron laughed and said,

“Evil, maybe, but you got the wrong one of us for genius. She’s sitting over by the fire.”

Harry nodded and then turned towards the group of ladies.

“Ok, El, he’s all yours,” he said.

Several more games were played with Eleanor and Harry switching off, but Ron went undefeated. The last game concluded shortly before dinner and Harry just shook his head.

“You know, mate, if this keeps up the set here is going to want to go home with you.”

Ron smiled and said,

"I'd love to have 'em, Harry, but I think they'd find our place a bit snug. Better they end up in your new library, like Ginny was talking about. I'll be over enough to make them happy," he finished with a laugh.

Dinner was an enjoyable affair and Harry did his best to keep his appetite under control. Truth be told it was starting to be a little embarrassing for him, especially when he was around people that hadn't seen him eat in a while. They always seemed amazed by it all over again. Mrs. Weasley, ever vigilant noticed and asked,

"Harry, dear. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Mum. I'm just going easy. I had a lot for breakfast and lunch and haven't done much today so I'm trying to keep it to just seconds," he replied.

"Alright, Harry, but don't let yourself go hungry."

"Yes, Mum."

After dinner had concluded the family settled in the living room and Harry found himself once again the center of Victoire's attention. Ron had graciously relinquished his place at the chess board and now Bill and Charlie were having a go. Apparently neither one was up to standard and Harry could hear a number of not-so-complimentary comments coming from both sets of pieces. He himself was involved in a more serious session of 'find the prize'. Whatever he could hide in his hand would become the prize and his niece was bound and determined to pry it loose. Occasionally Abigail would whisper to the little girl, who would then eye Harry with a little squint before redoubling her efforts.

By eight o'clock or so Victoire was sound asleep, her head resting on Harry's good leg. Her dad scooped her up and, accompanied by Fleur, carried her up to bed. They had said their goodnights and would see everyone early in the morning. Eleanor was playing Charlie a game of chess and was drubbing him. He was also being mercilessly criticized by his rapidly dwindling corps of chessmen. When he was finally defeated he looked over and Harry and said,

“Remind me to never play on this board again, Harry. You experts have absolutely spoiled these pieces. They have no patience for we poor amateurs,” he said with a rueful smile.

“I dunno, Charlie. They were pretty surly the first times Ron and I played. I think it might have been because they were stuck in the attic all those years. But I have to admit they don’t waste any time letting you know if you’re not playing up to standard,” Harry said with a smile.

“Come on, Charlie,” Eleanor said. “Let’s let everyone get to bed. It’s going to be an early and busy day tomorrow.”

Ron and Hermione left for their home with promises to be back in time for breakfast. Harry got up off the couch with Ginny looking at him with eyebrows raised.

“Yes, I’m coming upstairs. I’m getting tired of sleeping on couches. Besides, you sleep on the other side of the bed from the bad leg so if you bump into me it won’t be a problem,” he said with a small smile.

Ginny smiled and followed Harry up the stairs, her own increasing girth slowing her ascent as well. A little while later they were lying together in bed, Harry with a pillow under his mending knee and Ginny lying on her side with a long pillow to support her.

“Harry?” she said quietly.

“Yes, Gin?”

“Are you happy?”

“Of course I’m happy, Gin. Why do you ask?” he replied.

“I was just wondering. You’ve been teaching for a full semester now and your knee is on its way back to normal. I was just wondering if you were thinking about getting back to the Ministry.”

“To be perfectly honest with you, love, I haven’t thought about it at all. I’ve been concentrating on school work,” Harry replied quietly.

“Oh.”

“I know what you’re driving at, Ginny, but I just haven’t taken the time to think about it. It’s been kind of nice not worrying about it. But when the time comes I’ll give it all the thought it deserves. Let’s just concentrate on having a nice holiday with the family, alright?”

“Ok, sweetheart.”

Christmas morning began with a bang, as in an insistent banging on their bedroom door.

“Ginny, Harry, wake up,” Abigail said, doing her best to shout. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Alright, little one, we’ll be along shortly,” Harry managed to reply.

“Better hurry up or there will only be enough for you to have seconds,” she said, followed by what sounded like a breathy little snicker.

Harry just shook his head and groped for his glasses on the nightstand.

“You awake, love?” he asked.

“Yes, sweetheart,” she mumbled. “Who could sleep through that? For someone you can barely hear talk she certainly can be noisy.”

It was about a quarter of an hour later that the young couple slowly made their way down the stairs and into the kitchen to be greeted by Mrs. Weasley.

“Good morning, my dears, and happy Christmas. Sit yourselves down and get started.”

“Morning, Mum,” they both offered, “happy Christmas.”

Already seated at the table were Ron and Hermione, both looking very chipper as well as Bill, Charlie and Eleanor. Bill looked up and said,

"Well, you two don't look too bright this morning. Rough night?"

"Neither one of us are very comfortable right now, big brother. It makes for a restless night," Ginny offered.

"I can well imagine," Bill replied. "You better get settled. My two ladies should be down any moment."

Harry managed to pull out Ginny's chair while balanced on his crutches and then she held onto them while he maneuvered into his own chair. He began serving them both when the back door opened and in came George, Angelina and little Fred. The newcomers were just getting themselves settled when a car was heard pulling up outside and Hermione scrambled from the table to rush out to meet her parents. When she returned with her mum and dad in tow there were many 'happy Christmas' greetings exchanged. They had a bag with several items which were hurriedly placed under the tree at the far end of the living room and then they joined the rest for breakfast.

"Harry, how are you feeling?" Mr. Granger asked as he sat down.

"Doing fine, sir. Very little discomfort. I'm very hopeful for a full recovery."

"If anyone could make it happen, it would be Angus McLeod. He's one of the very best," Mr. Granger said.

"Good morneeng everyone, Joyeaux Noel," Fleur called out as she carried Victoire down the staircase.

When she reached the bottom she put her daughter down, who made a beeline for Harry's chair. While everyone watched she stood there with her arms raised and said,

"Unc 'arry, up."

Harry obliged and picked his niece up and he got the mini version of a Fleur hug. She then settled into the crook of his arm and with one arm on his shoulder she turned to survey the table. She saw her father and smiled brightly.

“lo, Da.”

“Hello, my lovely. How are you this morning?”

“G’d, Da.”

Then she spotted her cousin Fred sitting up in his mother’s lap and she wiggled out of Harry’s grasp and he swung her down to the floor where she scuttled around the table to stand next to Angelina and look at the little boy.

“I guess she finally found something more interesting then I am,” Harry said.

“Do not be concerned, mon ami,” Fleur said as she came up behind him to wrap her arms around his neck. “I theenk you weell steell be ‘er favorite for a long time to come.”

She kissed both cheeks from behind and then repeated the process with Ginny. She worked her way around the table and made her usual over the top fuss for Ron who, even after all this time, still froze up in red faced embarrassment. Harry could hear the low throaty chuckle from Fleur all the way across the table. When she stood up she was looking at him and he just shook his head and mouthed the word ‘cruel’. She fixed him with a raised eyebrow and then continued down the table to take her place next to Bill. Harry went back to concentrating on his breakfast. By the time he, and everyone else, was done he was aware that he was under scrutiny. When he looked around he made eye contact with the Grangers. They were both regarding him with amazement.

“Um, Hermione, didn’t you warn your folks about my eating habits?” he asked with a lopsided grin.

“Opps, sorry, Harry. I’m so used to it I just didn’t think about it. Can I tell them everything though?”

“I guess it should be ok,” Harry said.

While the rest of the diners moved away from the table Hermione sat down between her parents and began a quiet conversation. Harry stayed where he was in case he needed to add anything. The conversation went on for a bit and then Mrs. Granger’s head popped up and she looked at Harry. He just gave her a small grin. She looked back to her daughter as Hermione continued the explanation. When she was finished she sat back and her mum and dad both looked to Harry as if for confirmation.

“Knowing Hermione as I do, I’m sure she explained it all very well. It’s part of who I am. The others can confirm it, they’ve all seen it,” he said quietly.

Mrs. Granger blinked a few times and Mr. Granger sat back in his chair with his eyebrows raised.

“Just when I think I’ve got a handle on this whole business I learn something that completely destroys my sense of what is real,” he said.

“If it’s any comfort, Dad, we had a hard time coming to grips with it ourselves,” Hermione said. “I mean we knew what an animagus was and had seen it happen plenty of times, but as usual Harry pushed the boundaries way past what any of us thought was possible.”

Mrs. Granger was looking at Harry with a very odd look on her face. Some would call it bemused, others almost trance like. Harry was looking back at her trying to read her expression. The she said quietly,

“When I was a little girl, my parents took us on a holiday to the Scottish highlands. We went way to the north and spent some time in a small cabin. One evening I went outside. I wanted to see the stars begin to appear as it got darker. While I was looking at the last of the light from the sunset fade I saw something, or thought I did. At first I thought it was just a bat but the more I looked the more I could make out and I saw it had four legs and a long tail and neck. It would dip

and dive and then soar into the sky again. I must have watched it for five minutes or more before it slipped away," she said, softly, almost dreamily.

"Every night for months afterward I would dream about a dragon flying. Sometimes it would fly right over my head, other times it would be barely visible on the horizon, but always at sunset. I've never seen another one since. But I've never forgotten. And I've never told anyone until now."

The she gave herself a little shake as if remembering where she was. She looked a little embarrassed as she turned to face her husband and daughter. Harry leaned forward and reached across the table, offering his hand to Mrs. Granger. She almost shyly reached out to take it.

"There isn't much I can do about it at the moment. But once the knee is better I'll give you a chance to see one up very close and personal," he said quietly. "I'm sure I can trust you both to keep my secret as much as I do Hermione or any of the others."

Mrs. Granger's mouth turned up in a small smile but her eyes were alight. Hermione and her father were looking at her as if she was someone they had never seen before. Apparently this was something that they never would have guessed about her. The mood was broken when Mrs. Weasley called to them that it was time to exchange gifts. Harry got to his feet and was reaching for his crutches when Mrs. Granger came around the table and took hold of his arm. She looked at him and said softly,

"Thank you, Harry, for helping make a little girl's dreams come true. This is one of the happiest Christmas' I'll ever have."

"You're welcome, ma'am," he replied and together they walked and swung into the living room where Harry moved to sit by Ginny and the Grangers and Hermione sat down with Ron.

With so many people the exchange took some time, and with two small children in attendance, the level of enthusiasm was ratcheted

up a notch or two. As is so often the case Victoire had as much fun with the wrapping and ribbons as she did with her presents. She was, however, particularly thrilled with a stuffed green dragon that she received from 'unc 'arry'. Little Fred received one as well. Harry and Ginny made one particularly noteworthy presentation.

When it came time to give their present to their mum and dad, if on signal, which it probably was, Kreacher came in through the kitchen door with several large boxes floating in front of him. They contained a complete set of pots, pans and utensils as might be found in the kitchen of the finest restaurants. It was a dazzling array of copper, stainless steel and cast iron, all matched. Mrs. Weasley was speechless. Her eyes kept flicking from pot to pan to knife to ladle. Harry sat with a small smile while the rest 'oo'd and 'ah'd. Finally Molly was able to tear her eyes away and reach over to wrap her daughter and son-in-law in a bear hug.

Harry had also noticed the look on Kreacher's face as he looked at each item that had come into view. It was a look of undisguised longing. Harry smiled and said, once he was released from the rib bruising embrace,

"Don't worry, Kreacher. I have the same set on order for when the new house is completed."

The little house elf's face lit up like a beacon and his smile was ear to ear. Other gifts included books of wizard chess strategy for Audrey, Eleanor and Ron and a set of earrings for Ginny that matched her engagement ring. It was late in the morning before the final gift was opened, a hat and driving gloves for Mr. Weasley to use with the Popper. Bill and Charlie had gone in on this one together and they both got baleful looks from their mother as a result. She in turn got a pair of very boyish grins.

Lunch was a buffet affair and Ginny and Harry were treated to 'couch service' since there were so many people willing to wait on them, given their 'conditions'. Neither minded in the least. Harry had declared himself neutral in the wizard chess wars for the day, since he had plenty of opportunities to use the magnificent set. It became a

revolving affair with players shifting in and out by turn as opposed to the victor holding his, or her, seat.

It was probably for the best since Harry would have had little opportunity to concentrate since much of his attention was demanded by Victoire who wanted to show Harry everything she received for Christmas, to look at everything he had gotten and when she had had enough of that, to sit in his lap with her back resting on his chest and dozing off. Ginny sat at his side watching it all with a contented smile, thinking her children would have a wonderful father to watch over them.

Around mid afternoon, the Johnsons arrived and the party was complete. They, of course, spent much of their time fussing over their grandson but they also made the circuit to exchange handshakes and hugs with the rest of the family. Mr. Johnson took a few moments to talk with Harry.

“Well, young fellow, how are you getting along?”

“I’m doing pretty well, sir. I have great hopes for the knee and school is going great as well,” Harry replied.

“Good for you. Angelina has told us that you have been getting some pressure to leave the Ministry and stay at Hogwarts,” the older man said, his face serious.

“You could put it that way, sir,” Harry said with a grin.

“We’ll I’m certainly not going to add to it. You do what you think is best and I’m sure it will be the right thing for you and your growing family.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As the afternoon moved on the swirl of conversation and groupings of partiers ebbed and flowed. Harry was content to stay put and take part or observe as opportunities presented themselves. Something that he noticed from time to time was looks from Mrs. Granger. When they would make eye contact she would just give him that same shy

smile and whimsical tilt of the head. During one of the constant shifts in groupings Harry found himself sitting alone. Ginny was talking with Fleur and Angelina about what, Harry had no doubts. Victoire had been recovered by Bill and taken to her crib for a nap. Mrs. Granger came over to sit next to him.

“Harry, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Not at all, Mrs. Granger,” Harry replied.

“I was wondering, could you tell me what it’s like to fly?” she asked quietly.

“I’m guessing you mean without a broom,” he said with a smile.

Hermione’s mum nodded. Harry drew in a breath and considered.

“It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. I used to think that flying my broom was the greatest thing I could do. Of course as I grew older other things turned out to be equally amazing,” he said with a slight grin. “But the first time I flew as a dragon, I don’t know if I can really describe it. It’s so effortless. I don’t even have to think about how I do it. To turn, or dive or ride the rising hot air without having to consider whether I’d come off my broom. Even if I could take you along with me for the ride, you still wouldn’t know what it’s like.”

Mrs. Granger just nodded but her eyes spoke volumes. Harry thought if he had a way and he offered she’d not think twice in accepting.

“It’s kind of strange in a way, Mrs. Granger. Hermione absolutely hates flying with magic.”

“I know, Harry. One of the things she told us often during her first year at Hogwarts was how much she hated flying lessons. I think I know why. When she was around eight years old we went on vacation to the Caribbean. One day we were all trying parasailing, you know when they tow you behind a boat and you wind up high above the water? Well, unfortunately when Hermione did it she was paired with her father and a stiff wind blew up and the rope came

undone. They took a wild ride before they landed in the water. You could hear the poor girl screaming the whole way to the end.”

They both looked over to where Hermione was sitting. Mrs. Granger continued, saying,

“She wrote to us that first week at Hogwarts that flying on the broom reminded her of the whole business and she swore that she would never fly unless she was inside a plane,” Mrs. Granger finished.

Harry looked at his dear friend and when he saw her she was looking right back at him.

“I remember when we were flying on Buckbeak, the Hippogriff. She really hated that as well,” Harry said.

“It’s a shame really,” Mrs. Granger replied. “I’d give anything to be able to fly like that.”

Harry nodded and thought he could understand her desire. He was looking forward to when he could get back into the air, either on his Firebolt or under his own power. Any further discussion along these lines was curtailed when Mrs. Weasley called them all together for dinner. It was a rather lavish meal. There were two large roast turkeys with all the trimmings. Abigail had been kept busy making her special flaky rolls and there were several bowls of vegetables, roast potatoes and parsnips. Mr. Weasley and Bill shared carving duties and the new knives that were part of Harry and Ginny’s gift proved their worth. Soon everyone was digging in, passing bowls and platters and keeping up a running commentary on how great everything looked, smelled and tasted.

Harry, oddly enough, was not indulging in his now usual voracious inroads on his meal. The sights and sounds were pressing in on him and he could feel a warmth begin to build and radiate out to every part of his being. It was not the heat of anger but the gentle warming of contentment and satisfaction. He could feel the recollections of those bitter, pre-Hogwarts Christmas’ with the Dursleys slowly melt away. This would be what Christmas would always be for him now and until the end of his days.

Harry's Future, Part 40

"Welcome back, everyone. I trust your holidays went well," Professor Potter said with a smile.

He was greeted with a mass murmur of 'yes, sir' from his first year DADA students. It was the first class of the first day back from the Christmas holiday break and it was obvious that his students were still getting used to being back at school.

"Yes, I know, it's always tough to get back into the routine after a holiday. So let me ask a question. Did anyone getting anything really special for Christmas?" he asked from his perch on the stool in front of the students.

Several hands were raised and the first half hour of class was spent talking about new broomsticks or a wizards chess set, a toboggan and in a tour-de-force ten minute dissertation by Catherine Biggsby, a description of a full set of Quidditch gear since she had shown great promise with her flying lessons. Harry sat in near stunned amazement, marveling that the young witch hadn't gone blue in the face and toppled over because he swore she hadn't stopped to take a breath for the entire ten minutes.

The diversion seemed to have had its intended effect as the students looked much more alert so he launched into the planned lesson for the day. When they were finished and the students were leaving Harry noticed that Rhys-Jones and Biggsby were joined by several others of the first years in an animated discussion as they went through the door into the corridor. It appeared the lonely muggle born was making friends, perhaps towed along in the wake of the effervescent Miss Biggsby, but at least it looked like he wasn't feeling alone anymore.

Winter had come slowly to Hogwarts and Hogsmeade but when it arrived it did so with a vengeance. Howling, bitterly cold winds and snow, snow and more snow hammered at the castle and the town. By the end of the second week back at school Harry had to make a distressing decision. The thestral pulled carriage was having trouble getting through the snow and he was certainly in no condition to walk,

short as the distance might be. He could stay at the school but leaving Ginny alone in the small house wasn't a possibility. It was a tense discussion that evening around the small kitchen table.

"No, absolutely no, Harry. I'm not leaving you up here by yourself," Ginny said adamantly.

"Sweetheart, I won't be by myself. I'll be in a room in the castle with hundreds of students, the faculty and staff and all those house elves. You're the one who would be alone, stuck in this little house with snow piled up everywhere. I can't remember it being this bad. Please. Go home and stay with your mum and dad. I'll come down every weekend. If something should happen and you need help you'd have your mum right there. Please," he said imploringly.

Ginny had her arms folded, resting on her ever larger abdomen. Her brown eyes were hard and fixedly staring at Harry. His green eyes, behind those big round glasses were staring right back, showing all the love and concern he had for his wife and unborn child. Her resolve remained steadfast for, oh, another thirty seconds or so and then collapsed. She knew his reasoning was sound and totally selfless but she hated the idea of being apart from him, especially now.

"Oh, alright, Harry. I hate it when you're logical and reasonable. Kreacher, would you please go to the Burrow and ask my mother if it's okay if I come and sit out the winter there."

"Yes, Mistress Ginny."

"You're coming with me if she says yes, Harry."

"Of course."

And of course Mrs. Weasley did say yes, that she should come straight away and if need be she'd come and help. They packed several suitcases and Kreacher said he would get some 'friends' to help bring the bed back. Ginny didn't mind using a guest bed for a short holiday stay, but if she was going to wait out the winter and do it getting progressively more pregnant, she wanted her own bed. Harry

had heard that expectant mothers could be very demanding, usually for bizarre things to eat, but Ginny hadn't gone that way. If she wanted her own bed, he was willing to go along, since he wouldn't be needing it anyway.

So it was early on Saturday morning that pops were heard in the backyard of the Burrow and Ginny, Harry and Kreacher were standing there. Ginny and Harry each holding a case, Harry with both crutches under one arm, and Kreacher balancing two on his head with one hand and whatever house elf magic he needed. Mrs. Weasley must have been waiting because the back door swung open almost immediately and she bustled out to meet them.

"Hello, my dears, do come inside, it's far too cold out here."

"Actually, Mum, it's a fair bit warmer than what we left behind," Ginny said. "It's absolutely horrendous up there at the moment."

Harry left the case he was carrying for Kreacher to bring in. He only had another week on the crutches and he didn't want to risk a mishap. He really wanted off the bloody things. In moments they were settled in the warmth of the Burrow's living room, the fire blazing away, with hot cups of tea in hand.

"So, I must assume that you're having a bad time of it with the weather up there then."

"You could say that, Mum," Harry replied. "The snow has gotten so deep the thestral's can hardly get through so I need to move into the castle. And I don't want Ginny snow bound in that house."

"I couldn't agree with you more, Harry. I realize it will be difficult being separated but I think you are being very wise. It would be one thing if you had no alternatives but you do and it's smart for you to make the sacrifice."

"I just want you to know that I'm going to be pretty miserable here without Harry. I intend to spend a lot of my time in my room and to pout when I'm down here," Ginny said in all seriousness.

“Ginny, don’t be ridiculous. It’s not like Harry is going off to some distant land for years on end. I’m sure he’ll be here every weekend and if you need him he can get here in the blink of an eye. Am I right, Harry?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“You certainly are, Mum. Besides if Ginny carries on that way, I can only imagine the effect it will have on the baby. Most likely he or she will start crying from day one and never stop,” he replied with an absolutely straight face.

Ginny looked at him with a glare, while Mrs. Weasley was doing everything she could to keep from laughing out loud. Harry simply returned his wife’s look with one of his own, placid and unflinching. They held each other’s eyes until Ginny started to giggle and then she grabbed a pillow and swatted him with it.

When he departed the following Sunday evening Kreacher went with him and as he had that night at the black house he gently levitated Harry so he could glide over the snowy path to the castle doors. It looked like several more inches had fallen in his absence. Even though he had only been subjected to the weather for a few moments the warmth of the entry hall felt welcome indeed.

The next day Harry was sitting in front of his sixth year Applied Magic class. A new storm was hammering at the windows with small pellet like snow that reminded him of the day he crashed into the VIP tower after catching the snitch with his eyes closed. A raised hand caught his attention.

“Yes?”

“Sir, I have sort of a strange question to ask you,” the witch said.

“Well, that’s one of my jobs here. And usually the strange questions are the most interesting so go right ahead,” he replied.

“Well, sir, when we were on holiday break I attended a family party and there was a discussion about whether or not we had anything to worry about from dark witches or wizards. Some of my relatives were arguing that with Voldemort dead and all his followers gone we didn’t

have much to worry about. Others argued that it was just a matter of time before someone else showed up to take his place and it would start all over again. Do you think they are right? That sooner or later someone else will do what Voldemort did?”

Harry looked at the expression on the young woman's face, a mix of curiosity and dread. He looked at his other students. He could tell he had some of both sides of the argument sitting there. He took a breath and said,

“Whether or not there will come a time when someone to rival Tom Riddle will emerge I can't say for sure. It is certainly possible. That's one of the reasons we have this new class. To try and teach you all better ways to combat the dark arts when you confront them and to be strong enough to resist the temptations of indulging in them yourselves. But I would be a fool to think that that would be all it takes to keep everyone who passes through this school away from the dark arts. Plus you have to understand that not every witch or wizard comes to Hogwarts. So I would say that it is quite likely that we will continue to see dark witches and wizards. In fact I've had run-ins with more than a few in the time since Riddle died,” he said with a small smile. “But I'm also fairly optimistic that we should be able to keep any of them from growing into as big a threat to our community as Riddle was.”

“Do you think that a Hogwarts student would follow in Voldemort's footsteps, sir?” a wizard near the back of the room asked.

“I would very much hope not, but it's always a possibility. Of course that student would have something to worry about that the young Tom Riddle didn't,” Harry said quietly.

“What would that be, sir,” the young man asked.

“He'd have to answer to me,” Harry said, his quiet voice containing just a hint of doom.

Harry's first trip to the Burrow for the weekend had two purposes. First and foremost was to spend time with Ginny. The second was to have his first post operation exam. Hopefully, he would have made

enough progress to shed the heavy brace and crutches. After poking, prodding and medical imaging he sat in Dr. McLeod's examining room hoping for good news. After a while the doctor entered with a folder.

"Well, Mr. Potter I have to say I'm a little surprised. You seem to be healing up rather nicely and at a faster pace than I would have thought likely. I am still a little concerned about how stable the knee will be once the ligaments have finished healing. The tears will be gone but there was some stretching. We'll see where the physical therapy takes you. If things don't tighten up enough we might have to go in and do some more work. But as things stand now I think you'll do fine in the short term with a walking brace and a cane to help you along."

"That's great, Dr. McLeod. I can't thank you enough for all the help you've given me," Harry said enthusiastically.

"Not at all, young man. Only too glad to have been of service. The Grangers think very highly of you and that's as good a gauge there is."

He handing Harry a small booklet.

"Now, since you're going to be stuck up at that school of yours through June you'll have to deal with the exercises on your own. I'll take you through them and if you have any questions afterwards just ring us and we'll help you."

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied.

After going through the exercises Harry was fitted with the walking brace and then with handshakes he was on his way. Back at the Burrow in time for lunch, Harry and Ginny sat side by side at the table while Mrs. Weasley brought out the food. Mr. Weasley was sitting across from them along with Ron and Hermione who had come for a visit.

"So, mate. How long before you can get rid of the brace and cane?" Ron asked.

"I dunno, Ron. I guess it depends on how well I keep after the exercises. I'm going to see Madame Pomfrey when I get back. I figure if she can set up the schedule and keep after me I'll stick with it better," he said with a little grin. "In the old days it would have been Hermione but she's busy looking after you now."

Hermione gave Harry a 'look' and then laughed. After lunch Ron and Harry had a go at wizards chess, using Ron's Christmas present set, the antique set having been returned to the Black house. It took Harry some serious talking to sooth the two kings and their retinue about being put back in storage but he promised them a place of honor in the new library and that there would be plenty of contests to come.

When he arrived at the front gate of the school on Sunday evening what he saw startled him. It was evident that a fresh storm had struck over the weekend and the shoveled path had now been replaced with a tunnel. Someone, or many someones, had shaped the walls with heat of some kind to melt and then refreeze the surface and added an arched roof of melted and refrozen snow to provide a tunnel. Softly glowing lamps gave the whole thing an eerie, bluish hue. Harry was glad to see that the ice didn't extend to the floor and that someone had found some gravel from someplace to provide traction.

He turned and looked towards the town and it was hard to discern where the snow ended and buildings and streets began. He had never heard of there being this much snow at the school. His first stop was the hospital wing, taking care going up the flight of stairs.

"Harry, what can I do for you?" Madame Pomfrey said after opening the door to his knock.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, Madame Pomfrey but I had my first check up after my surgery and I was given some exercises to do. I was wondering if I could ask your help. I have a feeling I'm going to need someone to keep after me to do them. I don't have Hermione around these days so I thought of you," he said with a lopsided grin.

"Well, I am charged with seeing to the health and well being of the students and faculty so I think you've come to the right place. Come

in and we'll discuss it. We'll have to keep it quiet. I have a few sick students in here tonight," she said softly.

"Is it anything serious?" Harry asked with real concern.

"A trio of fifth years thought it would be a good idea to go trekking about in the snow down to the edge of the forest yesterday. They were soaked to the skin and half frozen when Hagrid carried them back. I had to dose them with Pepper up potion but they still have some symptoms so here they stay."

As Madame Pomfrey led Harry from the waiting room into the ward itself he saw three beds occupied by the wayward wizards, thin streams of steam still wafting about their heads from the potion. Harry recognized two of them from his Applied Magic class. As he walked by he made eye contact with each one and gave them a look that could only mean 'I would have thought you were smarter than that' and they each got a bit red in embarrassment.

Once inside the Healer's office Harry handed her the booklet the Doctor had given him outlining what he needed to do between now and the end of term when his next appointment was. She read through it, looking at the photos and what it was Harry would be required to perform in each instance.

"This doesn't look too bad, Harry. We don't have the fancy machines they show here but I think we can arrange things to get what you need. Come by tomorrow after dinner and we'll get started. Now, do you remember what I once told you about this being my hospital wing?" she asked looking at him, her expression serious.

"Yes, ma'am. The minute I walk through the door into the waiting room, you're in charge," he said with a small grin.

"Correct. You've asked for my help and you will receive it, but in turn you must agree to be here when you are supposed to be and to do as directed. Alright?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“Good. Believe me, young man, when I say I am as interested in getting you well as you are.”

“Thank you, again, as always, Madame Pomfrey,” Harry said sincerely.

“I’m only too glad to be of help, Harry.”

Harry went down to the small space that was serving as his temporary sleeping quarters to drop off his cloak and boots and then he went to the Great Hall. Since his room was only big enough to hold a bed and a chest for his clothes, he looked at the Great Hall as his study. He could have used the library but he liked the Hall since it gave him a chance to chat with students or faculty more openly.

As he walked in, using the dragon head cane, he was greeted by a number of students that were grouped here and there. Harry still represented something of a contradiction to the students at Hogwarts. Most only knew him by reputation and those times that he had come up to conduct seminars. None had ever spent any time with him as a classmate so he represented more of a legend than a real person when they had first encountered him as a teacher.

Now, with the second semester well underway they found him to be friendly, caring and very accessible, willing to spend whatever time it took to help a student wrestle with a perplexing concept or personal problem. Abigail of course was the lone exception within the student body. She knew him better than almost anyone and nothing about his devotion to the school, its mission and its students surprised her. She was sitting at the Ravenclaw table deep in conversation with several classmates but as Harry walked in the small side door by the faculty dais her head popped up and she looked straight at him. Her smile was very wide and she hurried to get up off the bench and she practically ran to meet him.

“Hello, sir,” she said in that breathy voice. “How did the visit to the doctor’s go?”

“Pretty well, little one. As you can see I’m off the crutches and down to a walking brace and cane so I’m making progress. Madame

Pomfrey is going to help me with the exercises I need to do but things are coming along nicely, thank you for asking,” Harry said with a smile.

“That’s terrific,” she said and then her face got a bit serious. “I was hoping you’d come in tonight. There’s someone I was hoping you could talk to. He needs some help and I’ve been trying to convince him to come see you but he’s afraid to.”

“Afraid to talk or afraid of me?” Harry asked quietly.

“Some of both I think.”

“Do you want me to come over or do you want to bring him here?”

“Why don’t we try going over to him?” Abigail said, indicating the small group she had been sitting with.

“Alright, lead the way.”

Abigail walked slightly ahead of Harry and as they approached one young wizard’s eyes got very big and he began to scramble up from the bench. Abigail made a rude noise and Harry heard her say,

“He’s going to bolt.”

“Young man,” Harry said looking directly at him and speaking softly but firmly. “A moment of your time, please.”

The sixth year froze in place, looking for all the world like a deer watching the headlights of a lorry bear down on it. The two other youngsters, a witch and another wizard watched as Harry approached, his green eyes never leaving those of the panicky boy. When Harry came to stand directly across from him he smiled a little and said,

“Your friends seem to think that I might be able to help you with a problem. Is there something you’d like to talk to me about?”

The boy's head began to swivel in the negative but he stopped when the girl sitting next to him nudged him in the side. He froze in place again and the girl made an exasperated noise and grabbed a handful of his robe, hauling him back down to the bench, where she leaned in and began to whisper to him insistently. Harry simply stood and watched, the smile never leaving his face. Finally, the young wizard seemed to reach a decision and he turned to the girl and said,

"Alright, I'll tell him, just stop going on about it."

He then turned to Harry and said,

"Yes, sir. I could use some advice."

"Is here alright?" Harry asked mildly.

The boy nodded and Harry sat down bracketed by the other wizard and Abigail who took a seat beside him.

"So, what seems to be the matter, Mr. Kensington?"

The boy looked surprised at the sound of his name and Harry smiled a bit more.

"Yes, I remember you when you were in my first year DADA class when I was the teaching assistant. So what can I do for you?"

The boy looked around at his friends and with a firm nod from the young witch at his side he took a breath and began. He told Harry the story of this past summer at his home near Whitby on the Northern Yorkshire Moors. About strange visitors at odd hours and hushed conversations. The boy lived in a large house with an extended family of mixed magical background. By mixed he meant that there were some branches that connected with some of the darker elements of magical society. Apparently his aging grandfather had serious views that did not hold Harry in high regard, or any regard truth be told.

Kensington had heard arguments between his father and grandfather about the way the wizarding world in the UK had been heading these last few years since the fall of Voldemort. On those occasions when

his father wasn't home, the young wizard observed his grandfather meeting with several individuals, none of whom could be described as looking worthy of trust. One who visited most often was a gaunt figure with long pale hair, but the boy never saw his face as the meeting usually took place outside and he would watch through a window. When he came back to school he had often thought to approach Harry but he was afraid. Afraid that he might get his family in trouble with the authorities and afraid of Harry, having heard what terrible retribution he had brought down on people he regarded as enemies, or so his grandfather often said.

"I don't know what's going on, sir, but from what I've heard, particularly when Dad and his dad were arguing, that something is afoot. Something about going back to the old ways, when wizards were in charge and the rest knew their places. There was a huge row over the Christmas break with my dad threatening to throw my granddad out in the cold. The estate came down through my grandmother and when she died, Dad and Mum inherited. Granddad has no claim or hold on the property. He threatened them with all kinds of nastiness if they did. That's why I thought more about telling you. I'm afraid for my parents," the young wizard said, looking down at the table.

The young witch at his side had placed a hand on his forearm. Harry looked at the boy for a moment and then said as he offered his hand across the table,

"Mr. Kensington, I want to congratulate you on your courage for speaking of this to me. I know how difficult it can be for a child to become involved in the affairs of his elders. You should know that the Magical Law Enforcement office has been aware of some of this sort of thing for a while now. I'm pretty sure I know who that long haired man is. We've been watching him. It wouldn't surprise me if our investigators know of his visits to your home," Harry said and when he saw the panicked look return he held up his hand to reassure him.

"Up till now we've been gathering information. What you've told me will be of great help and I'll pass it along," Harry said looking at the concerned face of the boy. "If you're feeling bad about possibly informing on a member of your family, don't. If your grandfather is

involved in something with the people we suspect, your telling me this way may help your parents a great deal. Try and keep that in mind.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said quietly.

“Well, everyone, I hope you have a good night. At least as good as can be,” Harry said as he stood up.

As Harry stood, Abigail did likewise and walked with him towards the main door of the Hall. Harry stopped and looked down at his ward.

“You did a good thing for your friend, little one. I’m just sorry he had to struggle with it as long as he did. It must have been very difficult.”

“We knew he was having trouble for a while but he never said anything until he came back from the holiday break. It must have gotten really ugly. But I figured you probably know more about that kind of thing than anyone, you know, keeping things inside and how to deal with them. I guess I was right,” she said with a sad smile.

Harry looked at Abigail and then said quietly,

“I know I said we shouldn’t do this but...” and he reached out and pulled her close.

She in turn wrapped her arms around him and squeezed as tight as she could. When they let go she looked up with misty eyes and said,

“I’m really glad you’re here, Harry.”

“I’m glad I’m here too, little one.”

He watched as Abigail went back in to join her friends and then he moved towards the front doors.

“Kreacher, I need your help,” he called out quietly.

Almost immediately the little elf appeared with a pop.

“Kreacher is ready to assist Master Harry.”

"Kreacher, first thing in the morning would you please go to the Ministry and let Mr. Milligan know I need to see him at lunch time tomorrow?"

"Of course, Master Harry."

Right on cue the following noon the tall lanky wizard was standing in the foyer as Harry made his way to the Great Hall. The acting deputy chief had a curious smile on his face as he watched his boss approach.

"Hello, Chief. It's good to see you walking so well. The surgery went alright then?" Milligan asked.

"Thanks, Milligan. So far so good. I've got some information for you," Harry said and then he proceeded to fill him in on the contents of his discussion with the young Mr. Kensington.

When he was finished Milligan nodded and then said,

"The old man is one of the ones we had on our surveillance list although the apparent frequency of visits is new information. We'll put some more resources on him. I'll look into seeing if we can find a way to put some pressure on him and see what we can squeeze out. Thanks for the tip, Chief. Maybe we can get this wrapped up before you're due back," Milligan said with a slight emphasis on the 'due'.

"The sooner the better," Harry said, giving no indication that he picked up on the subtle message.

Milligan nodded and then shook hands with Harry and then went out the door into the ice tunnel.

The ridiculous winter weather continued through February, piling up more and more snow. The portraits were all saying how long it had been since such a winter had last hit the area. A truly severe winter storm usually occurred every dozen years or so. A winter of multiple bad storms would come along around every twenty five years. What they were seeing this year was a hundred year winter but if it

continued along these lines until spring it could be the worst in over five hundred.

The stress of being pent up in the castle without any relief was beginning to show and Madame Pomfrey was kept busy dealing with frayed nerves and the damage resulting from a few brawls. Harry had the advantage of getting a break each weekend at the Burrow, but the cold and snow had found its way south, but not anywhere near as severe. They only had a few inches on the ground at any one time and there were still days of sunshine.

As February gave way to March the howling gales subsided and the snow actually started falling vertically again, adding to the multiple feet already on the ground. Some of the students were getting desperate to get out of the castle. Late one afternoon an alarm went up and Professor Flitwick was called upon to levitate two students out of deep holes in the snow when they tried to ride purloined shields from one of the upper floor corridors down a snow drift that was piled up to the second floor windows. They made it perhaps a hundred yards when the snow collapsed beneath them and they disappeared from sight. Fortunately there were a number of spectators that were able to summon help.

The adventurous miscreants were sentenced to a week of polishing every shield in the castle. To try and relieve some of the tedium Harry had Kreacher bring the antique chess set up and he set up a tournament. The need for some diversion coupled with the attraction of the dramatic impact of the archaic chess pieces drew significant crowds. The pieces rose to the occasion magnificently with many a shouted challenge and drawn out combat between contesting opponents. Harry wasn't sure but he strongly suspected that whatever spell was used on this set had more than a touch of Shakespeare mixed in. But it did help provide some entertainment to get the students through the tedium.

It was also helping Harry think about something other than Ginny and the impending arrival of his first child. Every weekend his normally slightly built wife was bigger and bigger and more and more uncomfortable. The Weasley women were convinced that mid April was a long shot and it was more likely the baby would arrive shortly

after the month turned. Harry thought the sooner the better as long as mother and child were healthy.

Harry was thinking along these lines as lunch was winding down on the Wednesday of the third week of March. He was looking out over the students but not really seeing anything when he felt a nudge in his ribs from Bill Weasley.

"Harry, isn't that Milligan in the doorway?"

"Yes, it is," Harry said as he stood up and began to make his way off the dais after seeing his chief investigator motioning to him urgently.

They met at the bottom of the steps and Milligan leaned in and whispered,

"Sir, we have a situation at the Ministry and we need you there right now."

"What's going on?" Harry replied.

"The Minister has turned up missing. We think he's being held down in Mysteries. The head spook and the head of Sports was up to see him this morning and his secretary thinks they left together, but she's having a hard time remembering. Looks like she's been spelled. Plus when we tried to get in the first door was cursed and one of ours is now in St. Mungo's getting unhexed."

"Cursed doors you say," Harry murmured and then turned and waved to Bill.

When his brother-in-law met them Harry quickly filled him in and asked for his help. Bill agreed immediately. As they were preparing to leave Harry diverted to the near end of the Gryffindor table and grabbed up several rolls that had been left and put them in the pocket of his robe. He looked at the other two and said,

"I may need the energy before this is over."

They hurried as best they could considering Harry's leg until they were outside the gateway of the grounds and then Disapparated to the Atrium. Things looked calm but Harry could sense an underlying tension. The three men hurried to an elevator and took it down to the ninth level of the underground building. In the hallway outside the door leading in were Maxwell, Muntab and her Special Tactical Squad as well as a number of senior Aurors. Harry was pleased to see that none of the trainees were present.

"What have we got?" Harry asked.

"We can't really tell, sir," Maxwell replied. "This door won't budge and anyone who gets within a foot goes down like they've been hit with 'petrificus totalus'."

Harry turned to his brother-in-law.

"What do you think, Bill? Can you do anything?"

"I think so for this one, but I've got to think there will be more. I need my old work bag from my days with Gringotts and it's at Shell Cottage."

Harry nodded and said,

"Kreacher!"

The little house elf popped into view in the corridor.

"Yes, Master Harry."

"Kreacher, I need to you go to Shell Cottage and ask Mrs. Weasley for Bill's work bag. It's very important. Then ask her to go to the Burrow and wait for us."

"Yes, Master Harry."

The little elf disappeared and then Bill took out his wand and held it out in front of him as he slowly approached the door, quietly mumbling a spell. As he got closer the air in front of the wand began

to glow a sickly green. When he reached the crucial distance of one foot the air all around the door began to glow and pulsate and Bills chanting go stronger and louder. Finally, with a brief flash and discharge of heat the air cleared. Bill turned, his face set in a grim, but satisfied look, heightened by the pattern of scars.

“Whew, I haven’t had to do that in quite a while. I’m glad I haven’t lost my touch. The normal code should work now.”

Milligan stepped forward and mumbled something and the door slid open. He turned and looked at Harry.

“When you asked me to poke around to see if they had done anything to the doors I came up with the standard set of codes. This nasty business must be very recent, like today.”

As Harry nodded two of Muntab’s Specials checked inside, covering each other with wands, then slipped inside. A third stepped up to watch and then gave an all clear sign to the rest. The whole squad and Muntab went in ahead of Harry and the rest. They stood and watched as the walls revolved just as Harry remembered from that awful night so many years ago.

“Any ideas on where they might be or do we check them all?” Harry asked.

“Not really sure, Chief. First things first though. We need to check for more curses,” Milligan said looking to Bill expectantly.

As if on cue they heard a pop in the corridor behind them and the little house elf walked in carrying an old canvas shoulder bag that had some strange objects sewn on and several unusual sigils and runes written on it. Bill nodded in satisfaction as he took hold of the strap and slung it over his shoulder. Kreacher hurried to Harry and said,

“Mrs. Bill Weasley tells Kreacher to inform Master Harry and Mister Bill that Mrs. Weasley expects all to return in good health or there will be very big trouble.”

“I’ll be very happy to endure Fleur’s idea of big trouble if we get through this in one piece,” Harry said looking over at his brother-in-law, who simply nodded in agreement.

Bill got to work. As the others watched he pulled several odd looking implements from his bag and began to investigate the first door. It sent sparks flying when he touched it with one of the implements and then crackled loudly at the touch of a second. He looked back over his shoulder and said,

“Go ahead and try it.”

Milligan stepped forward with a Special on either side of the doorway and he muttered the words of the code and the door slide aside. A fireball whizzed over his head and the two Specials dashed in firing their own counter spells. They heard shouts and the other squad members rushed in. There was the sound of spells and the shattering of glass. Then someone called out the all clear and the rest entered.

They were in the strange room that had the tank with brains floating in it. The tank had been smashed and the contents lay in pieces on the floor. Two wizards lay in heaps of robes on the floor as well. There was no sign of the Minister.

“Wrap these two up and put them under guard in the corridor. Jam that door open. As we clear a room anyone we find put them outside and keep the door open,” Harry ordered.

Bill opened the next door with the contents of a small vile and a quickly incanted spell. The curse let go with a sharp report. A muggle might have compared it to a loud gunshot. The door opened onto a miniature model of the solar system. Specials dashed in and Harry thought he heard someone shout the beginning of the ‘cruciatus’ curse but they were cut short by a loud shout of ‘expulso’ and something exploded. Once the smoke cleared they found a stunned wizard lying amidst the rubble of what had been the model of the planet Jupiter.

Two more rooms were opened and cleared, netting three more downed wizards at the cost of one Special who was hit by a strong

'impedimenta' spell. There were now only two rooms left, the Death Chamber and the Ever Locked room. Despite Bill's every effort he couldn't remove whatever spell or curse was keeping it closed. He finally looked back at Harry.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I just can't seem to get through this one. It's nothing I've ever come across or even heard of."

"You've done a great job, Bill, but now I think it's my turn," he said then turned to address his team.

"I need you to take cover in the two rooms furthest away from this door. I need the biggest one of you to come with me. Let me check the room first if the door opens."

Harry walked to the open doorway that was most directly across from the target. He stepped inside and a tall burly Auror stepped in with him. Harry turned and stood with most of his body behind the wall to the side of the door. He looked over his shoulder and said,

"I need you to brace me when I throw this spell. It's got quite a kick. But as soon as I let it go, you need to pull me aside really fast and then get us down low, understand?"

"Yes, sir," the big Auror said but Harry could see his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

Harry set himself with his left hand against the wall and his weight leaning on his right leg. The Auror had both hands on Harry's shoulders. Harry said,

"Ok, here we go."

As he concentrated he felt his anger start to rise. He hadn't had time to consider but those all too familiar feelings were bubbling to the surface. The dragon was beginning to roar and Harry had to fight to remain in control. He waved the wand and with a voice that echoed a reptilian roar he shouted, 'INCENDIO DRACO' and imagined a tight blunt ball. The normally darkish entrance room was bathed in blinding white light and he felt himself pressed back against the Aurors hands

who, with a muttered curse, gripped Harry's robe and spun him around and then pulled him down against the wall, with himself between Harry and the open door. In less than a moment the whole building shook with the impact and the sound was deafening.

"Merlin's beard, what was that?" Harry heard the burly Auror ask.

"Leave that for now, let's get out there," Harry said and he felt himself being lifted from the floor.

He didn't notice any pain from his knee for which he was happy but it was only a fleeting thought. The dragon was urging him on to hunt down his quarry. As he walked into the entrance room he was met with a number of stunned expressions peering from the doors to either side. He hurried past without comment holding his wand in one hand and his cane in the other. The door that had given them so much trouble was no longer in evidence. The frame and a good part of the wall on either side were also missing.

He carefully approached the opening and through a thin haze he looked down into the Death Chamber with its stone benches marching down to the floor, the raised dais and the arch with the tattered black curtain. Off to the side, strapped into a wooden chair was the Minister of Magic, his forearms and legs wrapped in rope, his mouth gagged with a cloth. Behind him stood the haggard Mr. Lucius Malfoy, his robes hanging on him, looking several sizes too large and very over worn. He was holding a slim stiletto at the side of the Minister's neck. Harry waved his team to stand fast as he slowly entered through the blasted doorway.

He looked at the Minister and could see that he was alert, his eyes fixed on Harry as he began to descend the stone stairway through the amphitheater benches.

"Well, if it isn't the Minister's attack dog, Mr. Harry Potter, come to the rescue. I suggest you come no closer, Potter," Malfoy said with a voice dripping malice.

“Hello, Mr. Malfoy. It’s been a while. The years don’t seem to have treated you well. You look like you could use some rest,” Harry replied mildly, while inside the dragon roared.

“I’ve been busy, Potter. It’s taken a lot of effort to try and wake up the wizarding world to the threat you two pose. You and your ridiculous notions about equality and all the rest,” Mr. Malfoy drawled in contempt.

“Do you really think all this is going to stop what is going on? Despite the efforts of your compatriots the majority of people want to see these changes, Mr. Malfoy. They recognize that the old ways breed the likes of Riddle and yourself and they don’t want that anymore,” Harry said in a deceptively calm manner.

Inwardly he was waging a battle with himself. The dragon wanted to blast his old nemesis regardless of the collateral damage. Harry had other ideas, however. He continued to talk to keep his opponent busy.

“I’m surprised to see you using a muggle weapon, Mr. Malfoy. Tom Riddle would be disappointed you weren’t using a wand.”

“Not everything about muggles is useless, Potter. This particular weapon is very useful, particularly when it’s enhanced by certain potions. One scratch and that’s that,” Malfoy replied.

“And then what, Mr. Malfoy. You’d be destroyed in the next heartbeat,” Harry said as he slowly let a little of the dragon emerge.

He was only a few rows down from the opening and some of the Specials had gathered at the edge to be better prepared if they needed to act. One looked at the witch next to him and said,

“Is it my imagination or is it getting hotter in here?”

The other just shook her head and they turned to listen to Harry and Malfoy spar.

“Perhaps, Potter, but I will have eliminated one of the scourges of our world and you will have failed and the rest will turn you out for having

done so. I think I could go happily knowing you will have to live with that failure for the rest of your miserable life.”

As Harry’s dragon’s sense grew stronger he could pick up sounds. He could hear the breathing of the two men in the room. He could hear their heartbeats. He knew the one was the Minister, strong but fast due to the stress of captivity. The other was faster still but shallow and stressed. Harry knew that Malfoy was in bad shape from all the stress of the last half dozen or so years. A thought began to form.

He let a little more of the dragon emerge and he knew from the altered field of vision that his eyes were changing. He could see that Malfoy and the Minister could see it too. Shacklebolt looked amazed, Malfoy looked appalled, and afraid. Harry could see that Malfoy’s knife hand was lowering slightly as he focused on Harry’s eyes. He could sense the quickening of the already rapid heartbeat and he reached out with his senses and he focused on that sound until it was all he heard. Silently he muttered ‘Immobulos’ as he focused on the sound of the man’s heart. The sound stopped. Malfoy’s eyes went wide and the knife dropped from his hand to bounce off the chair and hit the stone floor. Lucius Malfoy let out a gurgling sigh and toppled over sideways to land on the floor behind the chair.

Harry sighed deeply himself and then began to walk down the stone steps slowly with his wand held low at his side. As he came to stand in front of the Minister he pointed his wand at the bindings and muttered ‘Diffindo’, slicing through the ropes. He then pocketed his wand and untied the gag.

“Hello, Minister,” Harry said quietly.

“Harry, to say it’s good to see you would be a gross understatement,” the Minister replied.

Harry gave the Minister a tired smile and then he turned and called out.

“It’s clear, come in.”

The Specials rushed into the room, fanning out looking to see if anyone else may have been hiding. Maxwell and Milligan hurried down to where the Minister was still sitting in the chair, rubbing where the ropes had chafed the skin on his forearms. Bill Weasley was the last to enter and he made straight for Harry.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Bill asked with his voice full of concern.

"A little tired, Bill, but otherwise unscathed, for once," he replied.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll and began to eat it seemingly without realizing it. He turned back to the Minister and his deputies.

"Do you think you should have the folks at St. Mungo's have a look at you, sir?" Harry asked.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Harry. They didn't do me any lasting harm," he said shaking his head. "It's rather embarrassing that they got the drop on me the way they did. I guess that's what happens when you become more a politician and less an Auror. One minute I'm having a conversation with the Directors of Mysteries and Games and Sports and the next I'm down here with Malfoy railing about the decline of wizardom and the rest of that nonsense."

Harry looked at Maxwell and Milligan and said,

"Why don't you two escort the Minister back up to his office. Someone contact Mrs. Malfoy and see about the body. I'm going to make a stop at my office and then I'll be up to see the Minister," he said and then he turned to Bill. "Would you mind going out to the Burrow and let everyone know what happened? I'm sure they must be pretty anxious."

"Of course, Harry. You'll be out later?" Bill asked, watching his younger brother-in-law closely.

"Definitely."

The Minister stood up and shook hands with Harry and then Bill and then walked up and out of the room with Maxwell and Milligan to either side, wands still in hand. Harry looked down at the body of Lucius Malfoy and then with a sad shake of the head began to walk up and out of the amphitheater. He was followed but the burly Auror that had helped him earlier. No words were exchanged but it was evident the big wizard intended to stay with Harry until he was at his office.

As they passed out of the Mysteries department those wizards who were captured had already been hustled away so they were able to move unimpeded to the elevators. Harry and his escort finally made it to his office. Before he went in he turned to the big wizard and said,

“Thanks for your help. Why don’t you get yourself a cuppa and then report down to the holding cells to see if they need any help sorting out the ones we captured.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said with a nod and then continued on down the corridor allowing Harry to see for the first time the burn marks on the back of the man’s robe.

Harry walked into the room, showing just a bit of dust here and there and he looked for some parchment and a quill but couldn’t find any. A thought occurred to him and he went to Hermione’s office. He knocked on the closed door.

“Who is it?” came the muffled query.

“It’s Harry.”

He could hear a chair crash back into the file cabinet behind it and the sound of several very quick footsteps. The door was flung open and she grabbed onto Harry’s arm.

“Harry, what in the world has been going on? There’s been all kinds of rumors and then the entire building shook before. What happened?” she asked rapid fire, all the while pulling Harry into her office.

Harry sank down in the one other chair and leaned his cane against her desk. He scrubbed at his face and then went on to explain what had occurred. Hermione sat looking at him with her mouth open and her eyes wide. When he finished she didn't say a word for several moments. Finally she said,

"How are you doing, Harry? This must have been very hard on you."

"Yes it was. It wasn't like it was in the heat of a battle. It was a cold, calculated thing I did. I need to ask a favor. Can I borrow some parchment and a quill? There wasn't anything in my office I could use."

"Of course, Harry," Hermione said as she pulled the requested materials out and slid them across the desk.

She watched quietly while Harry scratched out a few lines on the sheet and then signed it. He handed Hermione the quill and then read what he had written. Then he looked at his best friend and slid the sheet across for her to read. As she read her eyes went wide and she looked up at Harry and then back down at the parchment. Then she looked back at Harry and asked,

"You're sure about this, Harry? Really?"

"Yes, Hermione. It's time."

Hermione stood up and came around to stand at his side and wrapped her arms around his shoulder and pulled him close. Then she let him go and handed him the sheet of parchment.

"Ron and I will be out to see you this weekend, Harry. There will be lots to talk about I suspect."

"Most likely. I better get this up to the Minister. Thanks for everything, Hermione."

"Anytime, Harry."

He left the office and made his way up to the Minister's suite. His secretary wasn't at her desk and he walked up to the door and knocked.

"Yes?" came the Minister's deep voice.

"Harry Potter here, sir."

"Come in, Harry, come in."

Harry swung the door open to find the Minister still in the company of Maxwell and Milligan. It wasn't the ideal situation for what was to come, but then again it would save repeated explanation. He walked up to where the Minister was sitting at the conference table and handed him the folded parchment. The Minister looked at it, almost with resignation, and took it. He unfolded it and read. Without changing expression he then read it out loud.

"This letter is to serve notice of my immediate resignation as Chief, Magical Law Enforcement for the Ministry of Magic. I recommend that the interim duties of the Acting Chief and Acting Deputy Chief be made permanent, effective immediately. Sincerely, Harry James Potter."

Maxwell and Milligan were looking at Harry in stunned silence. The Minister looked far less surprised.

"I'd try to talk you out of it, Harry, but I have a feeling that I wouldn't get very far this time. Suffice to say you'll be sorely missed but the students now and in the future will be very fortunate to have you there. I hope you'll remember your promise at the party about my being able to call on you for advice from time to time."

"Yes, sir. You'll know where to find me if you need to," Harry said quietly.

He offered his hand to Maxwell who had stood up and said,

"Chief, I know the department is in good hands."

“Thank you, sir,” Maxwell replied quietly.

Milligan had come around from the other side and likewise took Harry’s offered hand.

“Keep up the good work, Deputy Chief. I have my eye on a couple of sharp youngsters that might make excellent investigators. I’ll try and send them your way.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” the lanky wizard said in a subdued voice.

“Good work today, gentlemen. My compliments to the department. I best be getting home. It’s been a privilege,” Harry said and then with a nod to the Minister he walked out of the office and made his way to the Atrium where he Disapparated to the backyard of the Burrow, and to a new life.

Harry's Future, Part 41

The living room of the Burrow was full of somber faces. Bill Weasley had arrived earlier to apprise them of the momentous events that had occurred at the Ministry that afternoon. At first the two Mrs. Weasleys and the very pregnant Mrs. Potter were very upset at the idea that Harry and Bill had been at the forefront of such a dangerous situation. The knowledge that both were safe alleviated most of the immediate concern but now it was a question of what condition Harry would be in when he arrived as promised. That Harry was responsible one way or another for the demise of the late and unlamented Mr. Malfoy was beyond question. How he was reacting to that responsibility was the concern of the moment.

So it was that late in the afternoon the kitchen door swung open and a very despondent young man walked through. Ginny was in no condition to bolt from her seat to run to her husband but she was quick enough to see the look on Fleur's face who had looked at Harry and then to Ginny, questioning. Ginny smiled and nodded in Harry's direction. Fleur was up in an instant and swept into the kitchen to wrap Harry in her slender arms. Harry reacted slowly but then he was holding on as if his life depended on it. His face was buried in Fleur's shoulder and it appeared she was whispering something to him.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Weasley was helping her daughter stand and they slowly moved towards the kitchen. Bill remained where he was, knowing Harry was getting all the support he needed for the moment. Fleur let go of Harry, as if she could sense Ginny's approach, and stood aside. Harry took hold of his wife and this time the shorter Ginny had her face in Harry's shoulder and he was resting his head on hers. Then he brought his face alongside her head and whispered something to her. She pulled her head back and looked into his clouded green eyes and he nodded. She pulled him tighter and held him for a few moments more.

When they loosened their grip on each other she hooked his arm with hers and slowly walked him to a place on the couch in the living room. She gently sat down next to him and took hold of his arm once more. The others took their seats and looked at him expectantly. Harry looked into each face and then said,

"I suppose Bill told you what happened?" he asked.

They nodded and Bill added,

"As much as I knew, Harry. Some of it wasn't entirely clear."

Harry nodded in return and said,

"Well, the most important thing is what he wouldn't have known. After he left to come here I went up to the Minister's office and resigned, effective immediately. I'm done," he said in a low, flat voice.

It was clear Ginny already knew so her reaction was muted, merely laying her head on Harry's shoulder. Mrs. Weasley and Fleur were looking at him with wide eyes and Fleur's hand was covering her mouth. Bill said nothing, only nodded once.

"Oh, Harry, my dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "I had so hoped this day would come but not like this. How are you holding up?"

"I'm feeling a little numb at the moment. I suppose I should be getting back to school but I don't think I'm ready for that right now," he said.

"You're staying put for the time being, Harry," Ginny said urgently. "You're in no condition to try Disapparating. In your state of mind you're likely to wind up stuck in the ground someplace. You can leave in the morning. Bill can let Professor McGonagall know what happened unless you need to stay over, big brother," Ginny said firmly.

"I'm fine. It was more like being on the job at Gringotts for me. Harry did all the heavy work, as usual. I'll go back this evening, once I'm sure he's ok," Bill said.

They all lapsed into silence at this point. Harry was just staring blankly into space while the others watched him. Shortly thereafter the kitchen door opened and Mr. Weasley hurried into the house.

“Ah, there you are, Harry. I was hoping to find you here. After word got around I went looking for you at the Ministry but someone said they saw you in the Atrium, on your way here I suppose. How are you, son?”

Harry shrugged a bit and said

“I’m alive and Lucius Malfoy is dead. Not much more to it than that.”

“I think there is a great deal more to it than that, my lad,” Mr. Weasley said as he sat down next to his wife. “Two department Directors are missing. The assumption is they did a runner when things started going bad. The entire Ministry is in a state of pandemonium what with the rumors and the fact the whole building was shaking at one point. Your Aurors are combing through the whole place looking for clues and talking to anyone and everyone who might have seen or heard something.”

“They aren’t my Aurors anymore,” Harry interrupted.

“Yes, so I heard. Kingsley called in the remaining department heads and filled us in on what had happened. I’m not sure what was more upsetting, his abduction from his own office or your resignation. The consensus view was that you just needed time to think it over and you’d be back. We didn’t say anything but afterwards I talked to Percy and we at least are convinced it’s permanent.”

“It had better be,” Ginny muttered.

Harry leaned down and said softly,

“It is, love, believe me, it is.”

Her grip on his arm tightened. Fleur, who was perched on the arm of the chair Bill was sitting in looked at Harry and said,

“Harry, thesee ees not the time, but you weell tell us the details, yes?”

“Yes, Fleur, I will, when it’s not so fresh and terrible,” he replied.

Fleur was about to respond when a muffled sound came from upstairs. She smiled a bit and said,

“I theenk I know sometheeng that will cheer you up a bit, ‘arry.”

She got up from the arm of the chair and moved quickly up the stairs to the second floor. Unnoticed by Harry, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny exchanged a grin. A few minutes later Fleur returned with arms full of Victoire who had been napping upstairs. She placed her on the floor and the now nearly two year old bolted in Harry’s direction with a squeal of delight. Harry’s face brightened a bit, passing from distraught to merely somber. His niece clambered up onto the couch with a little help and then wrapped her arms around Harry’s neck. She looked at his face and said,

“Unc’ ‘arry sad?”

“Yes he is, sweetheart,” Harry replied.

She squeezed his neck again, kissed his cheek and then sat down in his lap, her arms around his sides and her head resting against his chest as if she intended to stay there until he was happy again. Harry wrapped his free arm around her gently and closed his eyes for a moment. The others could see the tears begin to stream down his cheeks as his head began to drop. Fleur came over and sat on his other side with one arm around his shoulder. In the silence that surrounded them it was easy to hear him saying barely above a whisper,

“I had to do it. For Victoire and Ted and little Fred and all those to come. It couldn’t go on and he was the last, I had to do it.”

Mrs. Weasley looked stricken as she clutched at her husband’s arm. Mr. Weasley leaned forward and said,

“Harry, if you’re trying to justify what happened, don’t trouble yourself. Lucius Malfoy lived far longer than he had a right to expect. He was trying to extract his revenge on you and Kingsley and the rest of us because he and his were stopped from dragging us all down into howling barbarism. You can’t feel guilty about stopping him.”

Harry looked up, his face wet with tears and those green eyes full of pain, once more.

“You don’t understand, Dad. I reached out with my magic and stopped his heart. He was worn and tired and sick and I killed him with a thought.”

His weren’t the only tears flowing now. For the next few minutes the only sound was that of the occasional snuffle. But then a low, not quite monotone humming could be heard. As if sensing her uncle’s distress Victoire was trying to sooth him much like her mother would when she was upset or colicky in the middle of the night, holding her and rocking and humming softly. It went on for a few minutes. Almost without notice, Harry’s head fell back against the couch back, his eyes closed, his breathing slow and regular.

“He must be exhausted,” Mrs. Weasley whispered.

“I’d guess that taking down the last door and then dealing with Malfoy used up a lot of energy. I’m thinking the emotional turmoil used up even more,” Bill said.

Fleur slipped her arm out slowly from behind Harry’s neck and after whispering something to her daughter, picked Victoire up and hugged her tightly. Ginny reluctantly let go of his arm and with help from her mother also stood up. Then Mrs. Weasley gently nudged Harry until he was laying full length on the couch and then wrapped him in one of the ever present blankets. Everyone then quietly moved from the living room to the kitchen to sit around one end of the table.

“This reminds me of those dark times when he’d slip into those black moods,” Ginny said.

“He’s tired and upset, dear. But I don’t think he’ll go down that road again. Not with you and the baby, and his students relying on him. Some sleep and something to eat will help. We’ll just keep an eye on him but I’m sure he’ll pull through it. Speaking of food, could anyone do with a spot of supper?”

There were a few nods so Mrs. Weasley got up and began to prepare a simple dinner. The rest sat at the table, occasionally looking over at the unmoving figure on the couch. Shortly before Mrs. Weasley was ready to feed her family, the kitchen door swung open and Charlie walked in. He was about to say something but he was cut off with a gesture from his mother. We slowly approached the table and followed his mum's pointing finger to see Harry asleep on the couch. He sat down next to his dad and said quietly,

"What in Merlin's name happened today? I popped in at the Ministry to visit Magical Creatures and the whole place was in an uproar. They said Harry was involved and there are rumors that he quit."

Bill leaned in and explained to his brother what had happened and that indeed their brother-in-law had resigned as the Chief of Magical Law Enforcement. Charlie was wide eyed by the time Bill had finished and he leaned back in his chair.

"Malfoy is dead," Charlie said as if to test the reality of it. "Good riddance to bad rubbish say I. I can imagine how bad Harry feels though. He must think he's an old broom, doing all the dirty work," he finished.

Mrs. Weasley set the table and put out the food and they all helped themselves. What conversation there was happened at a very low volume. Ginny was asked about the progress on the house. Apparently some of the interior fixtures and fittings were supposed to have come from the north but the horrific winter had delayed delivery so it appeared that the house was not going to be ready until the middle or last weeks of April. She said at the moment that was the least of her concerns.

The simple meal was soon over and they tried to decide what to do next. Bill felt that under the circumstances he should probably return to the school and inform the Head of Harry's situation. He kissed his wife and daughter good bye and made his way to the backyard to Disapparate back to Hogwarts. As it turned out he was in for a late night of explanation and discussion.

Back at the Burrow Mrs. Weasley busied herself in the kitchen while the others went into the living room to sit vigil over Harry. It looked as if Harry hadn't moved at all since they left him for dinner. Little Victoire had gone to stand next to the couch and look at her sleeping uncle. She looked back at her mother, her face questioning. Fleur patted the couch next to her and the little girl crossed the room and climbed up and sat next to her mother, leaning in as tightly as she could.

Ginny was sitting in the chair closest to Harry and looking down at his pale face she said to no one in particular,

"I had hoped I wouldn't have to do this again. Sitting and watching him as he slept or whatever. Now I can only hope that with him not being Chief anymore the chances of it not happening again have improved."

"I doubt that it's any comfort, Ginny," her father began, "but at least what he has been doing has been for the benefit of a great many people, muggle as well as magical."

"I know, Dad," she replied sadly, "but it's all so unfair. Even with all his power and strength, how much is he supposed to endure?"

Her father could only manage a sad grin in response. The day had proven to be a drain on them all and soon Charlie had left with promises to return for the weekend. Mrs. Weasley escorted Ginny up to her room once they had seen to Harry. She then came back down to sit with her husband across from their most troubled son.

"What do you think, Arthur? Did he do the right thing? Should he have found a way to take Malfoy alive?" she asked.

"Not having been there it's hard to say, Molly. From what Kingsley said it was a close thing. Malfoy had a supposedly poisoned dagger at his throat. The slightest cut might have killed him. He said Harry was trying to talk Malfoy down, as it were. But Malfoy wasn't having any of it. It was like he knew he was finished but was intent on taking someone with him. I'd imagine a paralysis spell might have caused the knife to cut Kingsley. Apparently Harry let enough of the dragon

loose to cause his eyes to change. The effect on Malfoy was enough for the knife to move away from the Minister's neck. That was when Harry struck I suppose. Kingsley said he just heard Malfoy gurgle a bit and then hit the floor. I heard what Harry said, but I'm not sure what he actually did," Arthur finished.

"I wonder," Molly mused, "if the fact that he killed Lucius is bothering him or that it was so easy for him to do it. No wand, no incantation, just a thought. How can a boy so young be expected to have the wisdom to handle something like that?"

"He's hardly a boy, my dear, and he's been through more than anyone three times his age. That young fellow is wise far beyond his years. He just needs some time to come to grips with this, and support from us to help him through," her husband replied. "Are you coming to bed?"

"In a while, dear. I think I'll sit up for a time longer."

Arthur gave her a knowing nod and a goodnight kiss and left the room. He wouldn't be surprised to find her asleep on that couch in the morning. Which he didn't. What he did find when he walked into the living room was Molly busy in the kitchen and Harry sitting at the table looking rumpled but alert.

"Good morning, son," Arthur said evenly.

"Morning, Dad," Harry replied after swallowing a mouthful of food.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

"Better. Not good, but better," Harry replied.

Arthur nodded and said,

"That's a start, and a good one."

Mr. Weasley walked into the kitchen to kiss his wife and then came to sit opposite Harry at the table. Despite the fact that Harry had most likely expended significant energy yesterday and had no dinner the

night before he appeared to be eating sparingly, as sure a sign of Harry's distress as any other the senior Weasley could think of.

"Harry?" called a soft voice from the bottom of the staircase.

Ginny was standing on the last step, looking towards the kitchen, her eyes wide and probing. Harry pushed his plate back and stood up. Carefully and without his cane he walked over to stand in front of his wife.

"I'll be ok, Gin. It'll take a little bit of time, but I'll be ok."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him tight. The extra height of the step but them nearly eye to eye and they shared a brief loving kiss and then he gave her a hand down from the step and walked with her into the kitchen. They sat down side by side and Harry picked at the last of his breakfast.

"Are you going back up to Hogwarts?" Ginny asked.

"I thought to. I have two days until the weekend so it won't be for long. Besides, I think it would be good to be with the students. Sort of remind myself of why I've done the things I've had to do. I think that would help," he said quietly. "I should probably get started. You doing ok?"

"Yes, now I am. Just come back as soon as you can tomorrow. We'll sit and talk and just be together this weekend and figure out the future. Ok?"

"Ok, love," Harry said, leaning over to give her a kiss and then he stood up, shook hands across the table with his dad and hugged his mum who had come out of the kitchen.

They watched as he pulled on his robe and took his cane and went out into the backyard. Arthur and Ginny turned to Molly for answers. She looked back and shrugged.

"I found him here this morning when I came out. He was sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea. I sat up for a while last night. He never

woke up but he did move a bit and for a little while it seemed like he was mumbling in his sleep. Then he settled down and I went to bed.”

“I’d like to think I know him better than anyone, but sometimes it seems like I haven’t any idea what goes on behind those beautiful green eyes,” she said.

Those beautiful green eyes were still looking a bit tired and sad when he returned to the school that morning. It hadn’t snowed in a week and the sun was starting to work on the ridiculous accumulations but the ice tunnel was still intact and Harry carefully made his way to the front door. He quietly entered and made his way to his small room to change his clothes and robe and then went to his classroom where he awaited the arrival of his sixth year Applied Magic class. He was curious, in a detached sort of way, as to the reaction he was going to get from Abigail.

As the first students entered they started as they saw Harry sitting on his stool at the front of the room. They hurried forward and the rest did so as the realization that he was back spread through the students. They crowded forward with Abigail pushing to the front. No one said anything.

“Good morning, everyone. I trust you’re all doing well,” Harry said quietly.

“Sir, are you alright?” Abigail asked breathlessly, her eyes searching Harry’s face.

“Yes, well, I don’t know that I would say fine, but I’m doing well enough,” he said and gave her a slow wink. “Certainly well enough to come back and spend time with some of my favorite people,” he added with a small smile. “Why don’t you all take your seats and we’ll get started.”

All through the ensuing class Abigail kept a close watch on Harry and whenever they made eye contact he would give a small smile. Since this was a double period they all made their way down to lunch when the class had ended. As the students entered through the main entrance Harry took the side corridor to the small faculty entrance

and as he made his way up to the table he was aware of an undercurrent of conversation beginning at the student tables. He was also aware of the eyes of the faculty on him as he took his seat at the table.

"How are you doing, Harry?" Bill asked once Harry was settled.

"Better than yesterday, Bill, but still a ways to go. By the way, thanks for all your help yesterday. I couldn't have handled all those doors by myself."

"I'm glad I could be of help, Harry. Speaking of doors, you and I need to have a chat about that last one. Yesterday didn't seem like the time."

"Sure, Bill. I have the feeling I'll be explaining a lot of things over the next few days," he said with a small grin.

"Professor Potter."

"Hello, Professor McGonagall."

"A moment of your time after the meal, if you would?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Bill Weasley leaned in to whisper to Harry.

"Don't be surprised at what happens with the Head. I got quite an earful last night when I got back," Bill said ruefully.

"Really? Didn't you explain what happened?" Harry asked, somewhat shocked.

"Yes, but you'll see what I mean."

The events of the last twenty four hours, plus the impending discussion with the Headmistress continued to keep the edge off of Harry's appetite and he only finished a single plate full. He waited pensively until the meal was concluded and the students dismissed to

their classes. Despite all he had endured and accomplished in his life, the idea of facing a seemingly displeased Professor McGonagall still gave him feelings of trepidation.

As the faculty rose from the table the Headmistress signaled to Harry and indicated the door that led to the small anteroom behind the dais. Harry stepped forward and opened the door and held it as Professor McGonagall walked past him. She moved to one of the chairs by the fireplace and sat down, indicating Harry should do likewise with the one opposite. Once Harry was settled into the chair with his cane leaning against the side, Professor McGonagall looked at him over the top of her glasses.

“Professor Potter,” she began with emphasis on the ‘professor’.
“Would you care to explain your actions of yesterday afternoon?”

“Um, there was an emergency at the Ministry and as Chief of Law Enforcement I was summoned to help deal with it.”

“Professor Potter,” again with the emphasis. “You accepted an appointment, however temporary, as a teacher here at Hogwarts. That appointment carries with it many responsibilities. Not the least of which is not running off leaving your class unattended. Or in this case two classes, your entire afternoon schedule. To further compound the matter, you took another teacher with you. Now I appreciate the gravity of the situation that unfolded yesterday but it is unacceptable that you and Professor Weasley abandoned your posts without notice, particularly when myself and the deputy head were sitting no more than a dozen paces away.”

Harry had the uncanny feeling that he had been transported back to his first Transfiguration class where he and Ron had been dressed down by the Professor for being late. He half expected that if he looked to the side he’d see a shadow of Ron standing beside him. He could see that the Professor was waiting for a response.

“I apologize, Professor McGonagall. You’re correct. I didn’t handle it very well, perhaps all around. I can only say in my defense that the news took me by surprise and I got caught up in the urgency. I can assure you it won’t happen again,” he said quietly.

“And I can know this how?” she asked, her stare probing.

“I guess Bill, I mean, Professor Weasley didn’t tell you. I resigned from the Ministry yesterday. Effective immediately.”

“I see,” the Headmistress replied, not giving anything away. “Professor Weasley commented that you had something important to tell me. I surmise that was it.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And your plans?” she asked.

“I hadn’t considered it since yesterday but it does mean I’m available to accept your offer to join the faculty full time, if you’re still interested.”

“Let me ask you a question, Professor Potter. Why did you resign?”

Harry took a deep breath and didn’t answer immediately. He stared into the empty fireplace and tried to pull his thoughts together. He finally looked back at the Headmistress who was waiting patiently for an answer.

“It’s no secret that a number of people, my family in particular, thought that I should get out before something really bad were to happen to me. I remember the phrase ‘something even the famous Harry Potter couldn’t survive’ being used. The allure to become a full time teacher here at Hogwarts was also a tempting reason as well. But after what happened yesterday and how it happened made the decision easy, essential perhaps,” he said quietly.

He leaned forward and fixed the Headmistress with his green eyes and said in a firm, quiet voice,

“No one that has the amount and types of power I have should ever be in a position of authority over those who don’t. The temptation to do terrible things for the right reasons is just too great and the

consequences too awful to think about. Did Bill tell you what I did yesterday?"

"He merely indicated that you directly intervened and put a stop to an attempt to kidnap the Minister."

Harry snorted a short laugh and said,

"It sounds so simple put that way. I vaporized a magically locked door, and a good part of the wall around it, with a phrase and the wave of my wand. Then I reached out with a thought and stopped the heart of Lucius Malfoy and killed him. With no more effort than a thought," he finished, sitting back in his chair.

To her credit, the Headmistress displayed no more of her feelings than a brief flutter of her eyelids. She simply sat, waiting to see if Harry would continue.

"Some people might think that I want to come here to hide. To stay safe from those temptations. If that's all I wanted to do then I could just wait until the new house is finished and stay there and live off my inheritance and raise my children. But I would rather be here, sharing what I know with students and helping them to become strong witches and wizards. And yes, put myself far out of reach of those temptations I spoke of."

The Headmistress continued to sit in silence as she considered what she had just heard. She had asked the question regarding his resignation out of concern that he might have reacted emotionally to the prior day's events and might reconsider in the near future. Now she needed to adjust her thinking. What she had heard was at once both fascinating and frightening. She looked back at Harry and said,

"Come see me in my office after your classes are done this coming Monday. We'll discuss the future, your future, at that time."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

He rose from the chair and with a nod to the Head he left the room and went off to his class. Professor McGonagall remained in her chair,

staring at the now vacant one across from her. Finally she shook her head slowly and stood up and left the room to go to her own office to begin a long, sometimes noisy conversation.

Saturday morning found Harry sitting at the kitchen table in the Burrow finishing off his second plate of breakfast. It was the first time since the events at the Ministry that he had an appetite that could be described as 'normal', or at least normal for him. When he had arrived the evening before he was still not very talkative but neither was he in the despondent state of mind that had worried everyone. He would have been considered 'thoughtful' by anyone who had seen him.

This morning he was the only one at the table as Mr. Weasley and Ginny had yet to appear from their rooms and Mrs. Weasley was busy in the kitchen. That didn't mean that she was ignoring him; far from it. Her cooking and cleaning skills were on autopilot and she was paying close attention to what Harry was doing. Besides eating, mostly what he was doing was staring into some middle space and saying nothing other than 'thank you' when she put something down in front of him. She finally decided it was time to try and draw him out.

"Would you like anything else, my dear?"

"Hmm, what? Oh, no thanks, mum, this is fine."

"You're awfully quiet this morning, Harry."

"Oh, sorry, I was just thinking is all."

"What about, dear? Remember, we're under doctor's orders not to let you brood about anything," she said with a kind smile.

"I guess I should go pay a visit to Dr. Parsons. It's been a while. I'm sure she'd find this all very interesting. Anyway, I was thinking about what happened and then what Professor McGonagall said to me. She was none too happy about what I did, not to mention dragging Bill along."

"I can imagine. It's understandable in a way. She is responsible for all those children after all. The two of you going off like that must have been quite disruptive. I'm sure she just wanted you to understand her position and her need to know what was going on," Mrs. Weasley said evenly.

"I know. She was right. Like she said, she was right there watching the whole thing. It wouldn't have taken but a couple of seconds to explain it. I just didn't think it through," Harry said.

"What else?" Mrs. Weasley prompted.

Harry took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked at his 'mum' and said,

"I didn't mention this to anyone but I had a visit that night, while I was sleeping on the couch."

"A visit? From whom, Harry?"

"First from Abigail, then from my mum and dad, you know, them. Later it was Sirius and Professor Dumbledore and finally some people I never met before. They all wanted to talk to me. I think Abigail must have found them somehow. They spent a lot of time trying to convince me that what I had done was the right thing. That it was the only way to bring Voldemort's legacy to an end. Professor Dumbledore and I talked a lot about power and using it and the temptations to abuse it. He thought it was a good thing that I resigned. He said the biggest reason that he turned down the opportunity to become Minister of Magic was he didn't like the idea of great magical power being combined with great political power."

Mrs. Weasley simply nodded and then reached across the table to take Harry's hand in hers. Then she said,

"It tore at my heart to have seen you suffer the way you did when you came home that day. But it would have been far, far worse if you hadn't been affected at all. Only a monster would have been able to do what you did without feeling remorse. But there comes a time when you have to put that remorse aside and focus on the future. I

think that time is now. I'd imagine you'll have some visitors this weekend so try and enjoy their company and let them do what they can to cheer you up and when you meet with Professor McGonagall on Monday you'll be able to discuss things with a clear head. Alright, my dear?"

"Yes, mum," he said and gave her small smile.

"Ah, that's my lad."

And Mrs. Weasley was right. All during the day it seemed someone was doing their best to cheer him up. It started with his wife, who once she made her way down the stairs and over to the table, spent considerable time whispering in his ear and holding on to his arm or hand. When she was finished he didn't look particularly happy but at least he seemed more at peace. Next was Bill, Fleur and Victoire and this had a very positive impact on his mood. Harry and his niece played her favorite games which included 'find the prize' and 'how do I look in uncle Harry's glasses'. This combined with a few sessions of tickling actually managed to get a few laughs from him.

At one point there was a lull in the uncle/niece antics and Harry looked over at Bill and asked,

"So how old did you feel when you got your dressing down from the Head? I went right back to my first transfiguration class, first year," Harry said with a smirk.

"Hmmm, for me it was around mid way through my fourth year. Filch caught Charlie and I chasing a practice snitch around the upper corridors after hours," Bill said with a grin. "As head of house Professor McGonagall dealt out the punishment which included a serious tongue lashing."

Ron and Hermione arrived before lunch and they both had a lot to tell him. All the former DA members sent their best wishes along with special emphasis on the fact that Harry wouldn't be returning. Hermione indicated that Director Grimsson was particularly upset that he didn't have Harry around anymore but blamed himself in large part by having suggested the teaching sabbatical in the first place. He

should have known the pull to stay would have been hard to ignore. Ron even got Harry to agree to a chess game after lunch.

The meal was nearly finished when George, Angelina and little Fred stopped by. Victoire was thrilled to see her younger cousin and spent a lot of time examining fingers and toes. George and Angelina had each turned their shops over to the hired help for the afternoon so they could come see Harry, mostly to offer support but also to get the straight story after hearing all the rumors running up and down Diagon Alley. It appeared that the official story was that the physically distressed Lucius Malfoy succumbed to a heart attack in the midst of his confrontation with elements of the Ministry's law enforcement arm.

Harry proceeded to explain what had actually happened. Everyone remained quiet until he was finished, even those that had heard the story before. Angelina was looking at Harry with wide eyes but George had a curious and thoughtful expression. Finally he said,

"I think the most amazing thing was that there was actually a heart for Harry to stop."

More than a few began to laugh at George's observation. Even Harry smiled and shook his head. Ron hauled out the chess set and he and Harry settled into a game. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley made a fuss over their grandchildren and the rest sat in a loose group talking about the soon to arrive baby and the soon to be completed house.

In true best mate fashion Ron did not let Harry's troubles influence his game playing and he mercilessly attacked Harry at every turn. It was also the best thing he could have done since it forced Harry to concentrate and that helped take his conscious mind off of what his subconscious was dealing with. After two well fought games, both of which Harry lost, he looked more at ease as he sat back in his chair. He looked at Ron and said,

"I wonder if there's a way to bribe a chess piece?"

"What good would that do, Harry? It's not like I couldn't see them making the wrong move," Ron replied.

“That’s true I suppose. But I still think it’s the only way I’m going to be able to beat you.”

“Oh come on, Harry. You’re world famous, richer than the Queen, can out fly the birds and you could probably out magic Merlin. You’d deny me the one thing I’m better than you?”

“I’m not trying to deny you anything, Ron, but you’d think I’d be able to win once in a while, wouldn’t you?” Harry asked.

“Not unless you learn to play better,” Ron stated matter-of-factly.

Harry looked at his best friend with wide eyes and then started to laugh. Not just a few a chuckles but a full loud laugh that soon had Ron joining in. The sound filled the house and drowned out another, that of a collective sigh as the others seemed to realize that perhaps a corner had been turned.

Harry's Future, Part 42

Sunday morning found Harry in a decidedly better mood than he had been in the last five days. He had had time to consider his situation, consider the impact of what he had done and after spending the prior day with his family, especially the youngest members, he concluded it was something he could live with. But he was convinced that his decision to leave the Ministry was the right one. This is not to say that he was all smiles and dancing around the kitchen table but gone were the sorrowful eyes and the heavy heart.

He was still the first one up Sunday morning and he was sitting drinking his first cup of tea when Mrs. Weasley walked into the kitchen. When she saw Harry she stopped and gave him an appraising look.

"How are you feeling, Harry? Didn't you sleep well last night?"

"I'm doing fine, Mum. I slept pretty well but I woke up early and I thought if I tried going back to sleep I'd wind up disturbing Ginny so I came down," he said.

"It'll be a bit before anything is ready for breakfast, Harry. We'll you be ok?"

"I'll be fine, Mum. Whenever it's ready will be alright," he replied.

So Harry sat and sipped his tea while his mum went about fixing breakfast. They exchanged some small talk but Molly slipped in a few questions drawing from Harry some ideas about what the future held. He was hoping that the Headmistress wasn't going to still be upset when he talked to her the following day. He knew his future would be secure thanks to his parents and Sirius' legacies but secure wasn't the same as satisfying, interesting or challenging. He was also anxious to get settled into the new house.

"Harry, I couldn't help but notice that you didn't mention anything about the baby," Molly said quietly.

"To be perfectly honest with you, Mum, I've been trying not to think about it. The closer it gets the scarier it seems to be," Harry said, looking at her with a small grin. "I'm going to be an actual father, not just a guardian or godfather or uncle, but a true dad. It seems a little unreal."

"Unreal? This coming from a man who can turn himself into a monstrous great dragon or travel through strange portals to do battle with powerful dark wizards? Bringing a child into the world is the most real thing a person can ever do, young fellow me lad. Miraculous, wondrous, and yes, even magical, but certainly real," she said with a soft smile. "And you can take that from an expert on the subject."

Harry smiled back at her and had the same smile when he heard a soft voice call from the staircase.

"Harry, is everything alright? You look like you've been awake for a while already," Ginny said.

"I did get up early. But I'm alright. I slept pretty well."

She smiled at him and walked, slowly, into the kitchen and with help from her husband sat down at the table where he leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek and receive one in return. Shortly after, Mr. Weasley also came to the table and Mrs. Weasley began to serve breakfast. It was a leisurely meal and the conversation went over much of the same territory as had Harry and Mrs. Weasley shortly before.

Ginny was very anxious to be settled into their new home with their expanded family. She was likewise concerned about what Harry was in for when he next met with Professor McGonagall. Mr. Weasley didn't think it was much to be concerned about.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it. She made her position quite clear the other day and I'm willing to wager that she's ready to get down to business," he said.

"I certainly hope so. I'm not interested in turning into an eleven year old again," Harry said.

While the others were laughing, someone knocked on the kitchen door. Mrs. Weasley got up saying,

“Now I wonder who that could be.”

This was a valid comment since no one in the family bothered to knock anymore, having been repeatedly told ‘this is your home, why do you think you have to be let in’. She went to the door and opened it up and they could see her looking down. Then she looked over her shoulder and said,

“Harry, you have a special visitor here to see you.”

Harry looked at her expectantly and as she stepped aside to let the visitor through he broke into a big grin.

“Teddy!” Harry exclaimed.

His godson rushed forward to be engulfed in a bear hug from Harry.

“Hiya, Harry. How are you doing?” the boy asked once he was given some room to speak.

“I’m doing ok, young fella. Had a bit of a rough patch but that’s pretty much behind me. How about you? How are things with you?”

“Doing alright.”

“I assume your grandmother brought you here,” Harry said looking back toward the door.

He saw that Mrs. Weasley had grabbed a cloak from beside the door and had gone out into the yard.

“Yup, she did. Guess she wanted to talk to Mrs. Weasley first. We’ll use the floo network to get home, I guess.”

“Well, have a seat and we’ll talk while we wait for her to come in,” Harry said.

Teddy took a seat in the chair beside Harry and looked around.

“Is Abigail here?”

“No, Ted. She’s up at school. Why? Did you think she’d be here?” Harry asked.

“I wasn’t sure. I know she spent some weekends here last year and I thought after what happened she might be here this time,” the boy said matter-of-factly.

“How did you know she had been here?”

“She’s been sending me a letter from school almost every week since after you and Ginny got married. At first she would send a picture she’d drawn with a little note on it. But after I got better at reading and writing she would send letters and I would send some back. She’s been keeping me up on what she’s been doing at school and all about you. But the stuff the other day I heard from Nan. I guess she’ll talk to you more about that,” Teddy said quietly.

Harry just nodded and then looked at the boy. He looked more closely and then said,

“Teddy, why are your eyes different colors?”

Teddy laughed and said,

“I was wondering when you’d notice, Harry. I can change the color of them whenever I want and do a few other things,” he said and then with a look of concentration his ears started to grow and his nose got wider.

A voice from the door to the yard said,

“Ted Remus Lupin, what have I told you about changing your features before you’ve had time to learn proper magic?”

“Sorry, Nan, I was just showing Harry what I could do.”

The woman standing in the doorway looked all the world like Bellatrix Lestrange only with softer features, warm eyes and brown hair. Andromeda Tonks stood with arms folded and a raised eyebrow as she regarded her only grandson. Then she shook her head and smiled. Then she looked at Harry and her smile widened.

“Well, Harry. I had prepared myself for the worst but it looks like you’re holding up from your latest adventure rather well,” she said.

Harry had risen and met Andromeda half way and they hugged each other. She whispered something in his ear and Harry started to laugh and then he pulled out a chair at the table for her. Andromeda looked across the table at Mr. Weasley and said,

“Cousin Arthur, you’re looking well.”

“Thank you, Meda, the same could be said for you,” Arthur replied. “You know, I’ve always wondered why you insist on calling me ‘cousin’.”

“It helps to remind me that I have at least one sane relative, no matter how distant. With Sirius gone you’re all I’ve got left, well, you and Teddy.”

“Now, now, Meda. It’s not all that bad. Don’t forget, you’re also related to my children and grandchildren. I’d say your circle of sane relatives has grown significantly,” Arthur said.

“That’s true, isn’t it? I hadn’t thought about that,” she said with a thoughtful look. “Although I have my doubts about George.”

This got a number of laughs. Then Andromeda looked at Harry and said,

“Harry, could I have a few moments in private with you?”

“Certainly, Mrs. Tonks,” he replied.

“Harry,” she said with a slightly exasperated tone that sounded a great deal like Arthur Weasley. “I think we know each other well enough for you to use my first name.”

“Alright, Andromeda.”

Harry walked into the living room with Teddy’s grandmother and they sat down in chairs across from one another. The older woman looked across at Harry as if studying him for a moment or two and then said,

“First of all, Harry, as always I want to thank you for your continued support of Teddy and me. I don’t think Remus and Nymphodora could have chosen a better godfather for their son,” she said with a sad grin.

“You’re welcome, Andromeda. And it’s my pleasure. Teddy is a great kid and he does form a link, I guess, that’s very important to me what with his dad and my dad having been best friends. You’re both family and I take that sort of thing very seriously.”

“Yes, I know you do. There’s something else I’d like to say. I know you’ve been very upset these last few days because of what you did at the Ministry. I heard some things from people I know and Molly was telling me more outside. I know you feel badly because of what you did to Lucius, but you needn’t. It was long overdue. To this day I can never understand what Cissy saw in that creature. Money and family connections are supposed to mean a great deal in pureblood circles but they pale in comparison to dark side of Lucius’ nature,” she said and then sighed. “But insanity does run in my family so I guess trying to understand is a futile effort. You did us all a great favor last week, my boy. I wouldn’t think to suggest you take pride in it, but don’t let it weigh on your mind. You have much better and more important things to concern yourself with these days,” she finished saying with a meaningful look in Ginny’s direction.

Harry gave this rather remarkable witch a smile and a nod. He decided he wouldn’t go into the fact that it was more the method than the actual act that was giving him the most trouble. His thoughts were derailed by the arrival of Teddy in the living room. Harry reached out and tousled the boy’s hair and then looked at his grandmother.

"I just had a thought. Ginny and I expect to be in the new house within the month. What would you say to having young Ted here come for an extended visit this summer? There will be plenty of room and Abigail will be there," Harry said.

"Harry, don't you think you and Ginny will have your hands full with the new baby?" Andromeda replied.

"Most likely, but I imagine there will be plenty of help in that department. I expect a lot of people in and out of the place so what's one more. Besides, I haven't had much of a chance to spend time with him. He can learn wizards' chess and get a head start on his broom flying."

Teddy's ears perked up at the sound of broom flying and he looked expectantly at his grandmother. She sat regarding him with pursed lips and narrowed eyes. Then she looked back at Harry.

"Actually, it sounds like a very good idea. It might be good for him to have a male influence for a while and it would give me a chance to visit with some friends I haven't seen in some time. When did you have in mind, Harry?"

"I was thinking July, the whole month," he replied.

"Ted, do you think you could spend a month with Harry and Ginny and not drive them out of their minds?"

"Yes, Nan. I think it would be really great and besides, who would be crazy enough to try and mess the great Harry Potter about?" he asked with a perfectly straight face.

That Harry's weekend concluded better than it had started helped put him in a more suitable frame of mind for his meeting with Professor McGonagall on Monday afternoon. For Hogwarts the weekend had been sunny and while not warm, at least it had been above freezing and the snowpack was beginning to recede. When Harry arrived early Monday morning he saw that someone had removed the roof section of the tunnel and the walls of what remained were wet with melt water.

Now that his classes were over for the day he was making his way to the Head's office, calm and ready for what was to come.

As he approached the statue that served as the door to the spiral staircase the sculpture ground aside and Harry began the climb upward. He used his cane, more as a precaution than a necessity, as his knee was responding well to the exercises and his low overall activity level. He passed through the anteroom and knocked on the door to the main office.

"Come ahead," he heard Professor McGonagall call out.

Harry opened the door and entered, nodding to the Professor as he said,

"Good afternoon, Professor McGonagall."

"Good afternoon, Professor Potter. Right on time. Please, be seated," she replied evenly.

Harry sat down as indicated, wondering if the mention of punctuality had any meaning behind it, or was he just giving in to paranoia. He kept his attention on the Headmistress although he was aware that many eyes were on him and there wasn't a snore to be heard.

"I trust your weekend went well, Professor?" the Headmistress asked.

"Very well, thank you, ma'am."

"Excellent. So, to the business at hand. You indicated at our last meeting that you are prepared to come to Hogwarts full time. We, of course, have discussed that possibility on more than a few occasions. I have never been shy about making my wishes known about making that a reality. I am concerned however about this recent turn of events. Young man, I must say that you represent perhaps the most fascinating combination of magical abilities and potential that any of us," she emphasized with a wave of her hand to indicate the assembled portraits, "can recall, or even conceive of. And quite frankly, the most frightening. Even Voldemort, at his worst, required

his wand and a curse, to dispatch his victims,” she said looking at Harry, not a trace of emotion registering on her face.

Harry said nothing. He knew of course that there were many in the magical community that were frightened of him, or at least, their image of him. He had seen the looks on the faces of a number of witches and wizards in the Cauldron or along Diagon Alley. What he hadn't considered was that those feelings had reached this office.

“However, those of us who have known you best, that is myself, Professor Dumbledore and some of the other faculty find it hard to believe that you would pose a threat to this institution or its students were you to be made a full faculty member. Also, with regard to the students, your popularity, and more importantly, respect is without question. So, before we go any further I would ask that you agree to the following. First, that you not engage in any form of experimentation or exploration, as far as your skills are concerned, without discussing it with me beforehand. Secondly, that we meet on a regular basis, perhaps weekly to discuss how you are getting on. This may seem like an intrusion but in reality you are still rather new to this and I think it would be prudent. Lastly, any extracurricular activity, such as what has just occurred not be allowed to interfere with your work here. In fact, I would prefer no such activities whatsoever,” she said firmly.

Harry looked at the Headmistress and said nothing. He was looking for any sign of what might lay behind her bland expression and what she had just said. It was obvious that she wanted Harry on the faculty. But this latest revelation, piled atop all that had gone before was cause for concern. Perhaps it was concern of him, or for him, or both, but she was seeking some accommodation that would put some of those concerns to rest.

“Yes, ma'am, I think I can agree with that. Especially the second part. I realize that natural abilities are rarely a good substitute for experience. As to the last, I don't think that should be much of a problem. When I left the only agreement I had was to make myself available to the Minister if he wanted my advice on something. I didn't leave the door open to recall in the event of an emergency. There might come a time when they'd consider it on their own but I think

we'd already be aware of something that was going that badly. And if it helps put your mind at ease I was thinking about paying Dr. Parsons a visit soon. She was the Healer that helped me recognize my anger issues."

Harry could see some of the tension go out of the Headmistress. He thought he even saw a hint of a smile around the edges.

"Thank you, Professor. I appreciate your understanding and forbearance. Now, let us get to the particulars. For the coming year I would like for you to continue your work with the Applied Magic elective for fifth through seventh years. I believe that Professor Weasley would like you to continue with first year DADA and pick up second years as well. That leaves you with two openings that I would like to fill as follows. I indicated previously that I would like to have you become the Transfiguration Professor at some point. I believe a good transition would be for you to assume the role of instructor for first and second years. That would fill out your schedule and allow me to begin moving away from the course and devote more time to my role as Head."

"That sounds fine to me Professor but what happens to Applied Magic if I eventually become the full time Transfiguration Professor?" he asked.

"I've been giving that some thought and what I've concluded, in consultation with a few of my friends here," she said once more indicating the portraits around her, "is that what you've been teaching is too important to remain an elective for the senior students. Since the transition to full Professorship would take a few years I would like you to begin the process of helping the other instructors fold your concepts into their classes. That way each student, regardless of inclination for a specialty in later years, will have the benefit of this learning from their very first year. Then when you're ready to assume the role of Transfiguration Professor, we drop the Applied Magic elective. As part of our weekly discussions we can look into how we deal with texts. Either updating current volumes or having you write one specifically and using it as a reference. But we have time for that. Your thoughts, Professor?"

Harry smiled a bit and said,

“You’ve certainly given this a lot of thought, ma’am. It’s funny in a way though. Considering my past I would have thought that I’d wind up teaching charms or DADA someday. To me, Transfiguration was always more of an art. I’ve tended to see myself more of a fighter than an artist,” he said with a wry grin.

“The fact that you see it so is a good indication that you understand Transfiguration better than most. Those with the artist’s eye for detail are often the best when it comes to transfiguring. Your Miss Westwood is especially adept. Anything else?” the Headmistress prompted.

“Well, I think the idea of pushing the concepts of Applied Magic out to the other courses is sound. It would certainly mean it would reach a broader audience. I would love to work with the other Professors in structuring it. As to writing a text I guess I have enough notes to start formalizing them, one way or another. Yes, ma’am I think it’s a workable plan.”

“Excellent. I’ll submit your appointment to the Board of Governors but I don’t think there should be any issue,” the Headmistress said with a small smile.

“Harry, my boy, a moment if you would.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said as he looked over to Professor Dumbledore’s portrait.

“In keeping with the idea of you talking on the role of Transfiguration Professor, I would suggest you take the time between now and the coming term to practice with your wand. Your proclivity for spell casting without one may have eroded your skills a bit,” his mentor said with a touch of a smile.

“You’re probably right, sir,” Harry said. “Using it last week was the first time in a while and it has been infrequent. I should talk to Professor Flitwick about a refresher,” he said and as he did so he pulled his wand out of his robe pocket.

He was astonished at what he saw. After freeing the Minister from his ropes, Harry had just stuck it in his pocket and gave it no further thought. It appeared that his wand was missing the last two inches and about a quarter of an inch of the remainder was charred black.

“My goodness, Harry. Just what was it you were doing with that?” the Headmistress asked.

“You’ll remember that I told you I vaporized the door and surrounding stonework leading to the Death Chamber in the Mysteries Department. I used this to do it. Well the wand, a charm and my imaging trick,” Harry replied.

“My boy, would you indulge us with a bit more information please?” Professor Dumbledore asked.

Harry proceeded to explain how he had the idea of making use of dragon’s fire but while still in human form. He described his initial experiment in the den of the Black house, then the larger scale effort out in front of the Burrow.

“So when Bill Weasley couldn’t uncurses the door I thought I’d give this a try. I suppose if I had given it some more thought I should have considered the idea that flying debris could have posed a danger to the Minister but I was having enough trouble trying to keep the dragon from fully forming and just let fly. Debris didn’t turn out to be a problem since everything just disappeared. I didn’t notice the damage to my wand though. Looks like I’ll need a new one. Perhaps it’s not such a bad thing. It would sever the last tie I have to Riddle.”

Harry then looked up at the portrait of his mentor and asked,

“I don’t suppose you’d lend me the Elder Wand would you, sir?”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows shot upward and several gasps were heard, including Professor McGonagall. Harry’s straight face soon broke into a large smile and he laughed a bit.

“I’m only teasing, sir. I can get into enough trouble without that kind of help. I’ll drop in at Ollivander’s and look for a new one.”

“Well, Professor Potter. I think we’ve talked enough for today. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied and then got up and with a nod to Dumbledore left the office.

Had he lingered a moment outside he might have heard,

“Albus, do you really think he was joking about the Elder Wand?”

“Yes, Minerva, I think so.”

“The thought of that much natural ability amplified by the Elder Wand is enough to give me nightmares,” she replied.

“Have faith. Harry has demonstrated his trustworthiness and nobility time and time again. Besides, no nightmare of yours could compare with those he has every waking moment. He has come to fear his powers far more than anyone else.”

The remainder of the week passed fairly pleasantly for Harry. The sense of well being that filled him whenever he was in a classroom was far more powerful than any lingering distress over past events. This combined with his time in the Great Hall in the evenings and during free periods interacting with the students did much to improve his overall state of mind. His sleep was a bit troubled with reenactments of the events in the Mysteries department. Unfortunately, his prior experience in dealing with troubling dreams was of no use here since his dreams were accurate in their retelling. It was the reality that was so disturbing.

He also had to opportunity to talk at some length with Abigail and her role in the unfolding drama in the days after his killing of Lucius Malfoy. He had walked into the Great Hall after having had a short meeting with Professor McGonagall to discuss some details for the coming year and he saw Abigail sitting with the same group that

included the young Mr. Kensington. He walked up and first made eye contact with the young man.

“Good evening, Mr. Kensington. How are you getting on?” he asked mildly.

“Fairly well, sir. I understand that things at home are relatively quiet right now. No more strange visitors and grandfather has pretty much locked himself in his room. I understand an investigator came out to see him and he’s been very docile ever since.”

“I hope things stay that way for you and your family then. I don’t imagine there would be much sympathy for his views all things considered,” Harry said.

“No, sir. I can’t imagine any at all,” the young wizard said with a wry grin.

“Miss Westwood, could you spare me some time?” Harry asked.

“Of course, sir,” she said as she stood up and followed Harry to the first year end of the Gryffindor table.

“You know, Harry,” she began, “they all know that I live with you. Calling me by my first name wouldn’t cause the roof to fall in.”

“I am well aware of that, Miss Westwood, but appearances must be maintained,” he said haughtily.

Abigail goggled at him and then began to giggle behind her hands. Harry broke into a smile and gestured for her to sit on the bench next to him. His face grew more serious and he said,

“You know, little one, I haven’t had a chance to talk to you about that night after the incident, or to thank you.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Harry. You’ve done far more for me than I could ever hope to repay. I could feel your pain all the way up here without really trying. You needed help and I was able to provide

it. I learned from you that you do what you can when you can," she said with a shy grin.

"One of my better lessons, I guess. I am curious though about something. How were you able to find them? My parents and the rest?"

"It's an interesting thing, Harry. After I had my problems and I sort of shut myself off from the outside world I started to look inside. Well, maybe that's not a good way to explain it. What I mean is that I shut out what I was 'hearing' from those around me and started trying to listen for those that weren't. You know, like your folks, Sirius."

"The dead, you mean."

"I guess so, but I think it's not just anyone who's dead. I think only certain people can be reached, or maybe only certain ones for me. I'm not sure. It seems like I can find people who Voldemort used the Death curse on, like your parents, and those other people who came to talk to you. They were all killed that way. As for Professor Dumbledore," she shrugged, "he's pretty special all the way around so I don't know how he fits."

"Hmm, that's interesting. So what, you've just been out looking to see who you could find?"

"Pretty much. Once I've made contact it's easier to find them again. Sort of like following a trail back to them. I think though they have to want me to find them. I get the feeling that if they didn't I'd be blocked somehow," she said thoughtfully.

Harry looked at this amazing young witch and wondered just how unique her peculiar abilities were. Another thought pushed its way forward in his mind.

"Abigail, do you talk to them often? My parents I mean."

"I wouldn't say often, but occasionally. They are very interested in you, of course. And just about as proud as they could be. They're looking forward to a time when they can see you again but want it to be a

long time into the future. But there's something very important, Harry."

"What's that, little one?"

"They want you to concentrate on living and living well and happily. There will be plenty of time for the rest later, after. But the here and now is what's important," she replied, regarding him with those big soulful eyes.

Harry nodded a little then looked up to see the stars showing on the enchanted ceiling. When the snows cleared he'd take a walk to see the Centaurs and see what they know about the signs in the night sky. Then he looked down at his ward and smiled a bit.

"Sound advice. Pretty smart people, my parents, eh?" he said.

"Which helps explain their pretty smart son," Abigail said with an impish grin.

Harry smiled back and then with a bit of impishness himself asked,

"So, how is Tom doing these days? I missed seeing him my last time at the Ministry."

Abigail's face turned red and she giggled again. Then she fixed him with a tight glare and said,

"Tom is doing just fine, thank you very much for asking. I got a message from him earlier this week and he said he is a bit upset about you leaving but he understands your reasoning, or at least what he surmises as your reasons. He says working for Mr. Maxwell isn't the same but it's still interesting and he feels it's important work to be doing," she said.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. He struck me as being smart and dedicated and I'm glad I was right. Maxwell will find him very helpful. Make sure to let him know he's welcome to visit the house this summer."

“Ok, Harry.”

“Oh, and to let you know, I extended an invitation to Teddy to spend time with us this summer. Probably for the month of July.”

“Oh, wow, that will be so cool. He and I write back and forth. It’ll be fun to have him around,” she replied with enthusiasm.

Harry smiled and said,

“His grandmother seems to think that the novelty will wear off after a while but I think she was just teasing us. But he seemed happy with the idea.”

“Wow, Harry. A new baby, a new house, Teddy. This is going to be a very interesting summer.”

“That it will, little one, that it will.”

Harry's Future, Part 43

Saturday morning found Harry up early and eating a substantial breakfast at the kitchen table in the Burrow. The end of March was rapidly approaching and that put Ginny on the 'anytime now' watch. Harry intended to make his trip to Diagon Alley and Ollivander's his first and only business of the weekend and then he was going to spend the rest of the time being with his wife. Once he was done with his second full plate he got up, gave Ginny and her mom kisses on the cheek and headed for the back door.

"I'll be back shortly. Hopefully this one won't take as long to find as the first wand," he said with a smirk.

With a wave he was on his way. He Disapparated to his favorite spot near Gringotts and then made his way to the wand shop. He had taken the cane with him but didn't really need it so he moved smartly along giving a nod or smile to anyone who made eye contact with him. In moments, he was standing in front of the shop and he had a quick flash back to his eleventh birthday when he first visited the strange store. He took a breath, opened the door and walked in.

"Mr. Harry Potter. So good to see you looking so well."

"Hello, Mr. Ollivander. It's good to see you again, sir. How have you been?"

"Not as well as I once was, Mr. Potter, but well enough. How may I be of service today? A bit of polish perhaps. Holly, eleven and a quarter inches, Phoenix tail feather if I do recall."

"You recall correctly, sir, but I'm afraid it's beyond polish," Harry said as he withdrew the damaged wand.

"My goodness, Mr. Potter. It must have been a great work of conjuration to do that much damage. May I be permitted to see it?"

"Of course, sir," Harry said as he handed his wand to the aged wizard.

While Ollivander was examining the wand Harry took the time to examine the wizard. The man had never been what anyone would call robust but it was obvious that age and his run in with Voldemort had taken its toll. What little hair that remained was pure white. He was very thin and stoop shouldered and he moved slowly and with effort. His eyes, however, were still bright and penetrating.

"I must say, Mr. Potter, that in all my years I have never seen a wand damaged in this manner. Broken or shattered from falls or burned in the usual manner but vaporized from a spell, that is something new. I'm afraid it's beyond my abilities to repair."

"I thought so, sir. I assumed I'd be buying a new one. In a way, I don't feel so bad about it. This wand is my last link with Riddle. I think I'll just put it on a shelf in my library," Harry said and then looking at the aged man he continued. "So, what would you suggest for an aspiring Hogwarts Professor?"

"Hmmm, let me see," Mr. Ollivander mused and he began to work his way through his shelves offering wands for Harry to try ranging from oak, maple and willow, to ash and walnut.

They contained unicorn hair, dragon heartstring or hippogriff feather. Nothing felt right or worked as it should. Harry was fretting that this was going to be a replay of his first time at the shop. Mr. Ollivander surveyed the pile of boxes on the counter and then looked at Harry with a squint, tapping his chin absently with a thin finger. He seemed to have come to a decision and turned and walked to the back of the store. He returned with a box and laid it on the counter and pushed it to Harry. He took it and removed the lid. What he saw was oddly impressive. Harry picked it up and immediately he felt a tingle in his arm. It felt right.

"Hornbeam, dragon sinew, thirteen and a quarter inches. You'd be hard pressed to damage that wand, Mr. Potter."

"Hornbeam, sir?" Harry asked.

"Commonly known as ironwood, very dense, very strong. The very devil to shape but we have our ways," Mr. Ollivander said with pride.

“And I’ve never heard of dragon sinew, just heartstring.”

“The sinew is intended to add strength to the wand as well as tap into the magical nature of the dragon. Please, feel free to try it, Mr. Potter, but nothing too strenuous if you don’t mind,” the old man said with a small smile.

Harry nodded and with a compact swish and flick he levitated a stool that was set against the near wall. Then he gave another wave and produced a rainbow of sparkling stars. Then he turned and with a casual flick turned Mr. Ollivander’s tea cup, which was on the far end of the counter, into a small mouse and then back again before it could scamper off.

Harry looked at the wand and nodded and then he pointed it at a larger freestanding cupboard and floated it until it bumped the ceiling before bringing it back down again. He turned to Mr. Ollivander and said,

“I think this will do nicely, Mr. Ollivander.”

“It would certainly seem so, Mr. Potter. Allow me to give it a quick clean and polish and we’ll be done.”

The elderly wizard reclaimed the wand from Harry and disappeared into the back of the shop. Harry recovered his original wand and slipped it into his pocket. When Mr. Ollivander returned he handed Harry the new wand and Harry handed him the galleons.

“A pleasure Mr. Potter and I hope I’ll still be here when you bring in your firstborn for his or her first wand.”

“I hope so, too, Mr. Ollivander and thank you,” Harry said with a smile as he turned and left the shop.

Harry made his way back to his spot by Gringotts and Disapparated back to the Burrow. He went inside to find Mrs. Weasley and Kreacher busy in the kitchen and Ginny slowly walking around the living room.

"Ah, Harry, dear. Did everything go alright at Ollivander's?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Yes, Mum. It took a little longer than I had hoped but it worked out in the end. Mr. Ollivander also took some time to look at my old wand. He found it rather remarkable," Harry said, with a poor imitation of the old wizard's voice.

"I'm sure he did," Mrs. Weasley said.

"So, Harry, what did you wind up with?" Ginny asked as she slowly walked into the kitchen.

"Here it is," Harry said as he pulled it from his robe pocket. "Hornbeam and dragon sinew."

"Wow, that's a formidable looking wand, Harry," Ginny said.

Mrs. Weasley came out of the kitchen to look.

"Ironwood and dragon sinew," she said. "Now there's a combination I've not seen before."

"Mr. Ollivander implied that something strong would be helpful. It feels very good and I managed some delicate work with it too so hopefully it will serve well when I start doing transfiguration work," Harry replied then he looked at Ginny. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Harry. I find if I sit too long the baby starts getting restless. I got a little signal just before you came in," she said with a smile.

"A kick?"

"More like two kicks and a punch. If it's any indication, I think we are going to have quite the little handful here in a few weeks."

Harry smiled his lopsided smile and put his arm around Ginny's shoulders and in doing so saw the extra activity in the kitchen.

“So what’s going on, Mum? Seems like a lot of work for just us.”

“I was feeling a little lonely, my dear, so I sent out a general invitation for anyone who’s interested in a free meal to come for dinner. I think we should have a relatively full house this evening.”

“Really? That’s sounds like a great idea. I wish I had known. I would have asked Kreacher to bring the chess set back.”

“Master Harry’s chess set is upstairs in one of the spare rooms. Mrs. Weasley suggested that Kreacher bring it here,” Kreacher called out from the kitchen.

Harry smiled at his ‘mum’ and said,

“Brilliant, Mum.”

“Thank you, Harry, dear,” she said patting him on the cheek as she went back into the kitchen.

The first ‘guest’ to arrive did so right after lunch and it wasn’t anyone that Mrs. Weasley was expecting. Firstly, whoever it was, knocked. Secondly, when Mrs. Weasley answered the door the deep voice from the other side didn’t belong to any family members. Harry and Ginny were sitting in the living room chatting but at the sound Harry stood up and looked towards the kitchen door.

“Harry. There is someone here to see you,” Mrs. Weasley said, her tone flat.

She stood aside and the Minister of Magic stepped into the kitchen. Kingsley Shacklebolt looked at Molly and said,

“Now, now, Molly. No need to sound like that. This is strictly a social visit to see how Harry is getting on.”

Harry stood up and met the Minister at the edge of the living room. They shook hands and Harry said,

“Please come in and sit down, sir.”

"Thank you, Harry," the Minister replied and then looking at Ginny said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Potter, I trust you are feeling well."

"I'm feeling large and impatient, Mr. Shacklebolt," Ginny said.

Ginny had tensed up when she heard the Minister's voice in the kitchen but had relaxed a bit when she heard him say the visit was supposedly social. The Minister took a seat across from the young couple as Harry had already resumed his place next to Ginny.

"So, Harry. How are you getting on? The last time we spoke things were a little muddled."

"I'm doing fine, sir. I accepted Professor McGonagall's offer to join the faculty full time and our new home is nearly finished. Not to mention the baby's imminent arrival," Harry said with a small grin.

"I'm very glad to hear that, Harry," the Minister said, smiling, then his face grew more serious. "I owe you a great deal, young man. And not just about the other day. You've left behind a fine legacy, especially when you consider your relatively short tenure. Maxwell and the others have a firm foundation to build on."

"Thank you, sir, that's very kind of you to say," Harry replied quietly.

"Not at all, my boy, not at all. Of course, things have been pretty chaotic the last week or so. One way or the other, nearly all of the Mysteries Department is gone. Either dead, missing or under arrest. I was down there the other day and it's a mess. Don't know what half the stuff is they've got down there. It will take some time to work through the files and figure it all out. I need to find someone who can make sense of it all."

"If I might make a recommendation, you should give a thought to asking Charlie Weasley for some help. He has a great deal of experience as a researcher, he's very smart and I think you can be reasonably sure that he would be working with the best of intentions. Not to mention he also has contacts with a number of other researchers he could call upon," Harry said.

“That’s not a bad idea, Harry. Although from what conversations I’ve had with Arthur, I didn’t think Charlie would ever be interested in a Ministry job.”

“Well, I don’t know that he would want to make a career out of it,” Harry replied. “But if you’re looking for someone to get things sorted out and set up properly he might be interested. I think he’s going to be here later this afternoon, so I could approach him about it.”

“That would be very helpful, thank you,” the Minister replied and then turned to Ginny. “I’m afraid that I seem to still need to rely on your husband. I hope you don’t mind if I call on him from time to time.”

“As long as you come out to the house to visit and no one is chasing you with fireballs you’ll be very welcome, Mr. Shacklebolt,” Ginny said with a straight face.

The Minister laughed his deep laugh and said,

“Have no fear on that account, Mrs. Potter. Harry’s days on the front line are over, as far as I’m concerned.”

Ginny smiled in response. After a few more minutes of chatting the Minister got up as did Harry.

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well, Harry, and thank you again, for everything. I look forward to hearing from Charlie if he’s interested,” the Minister said as he was shaking Harry’s hand.

“You’re very welcome, sir. I’ll be sure to mention it to him today.”

With that the Minister took his leave of Mrs. Weasley and left through the kitchen door. Molly came out to the living room and said,

“Well, that wasn’t nearly as bad as I had feared. I thought he was going to try and talk you into coming back or taking a different job at the Ministry.”

"I doubt it, but even if he was thinking along those lines you two would have scared it right out of him," Harry said with a grin.

"Now what is that supposed to mean, young fellow me lad?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Oh, come on, Mum. Between the tones of voices both of you were using and the looks you were giving him he's probably thinking he was lucky to get out of here without a dose of the bat bogey curse," Harry said.

Mrs. Weasley's eyebrows went up but Ginny started to laugh and then swatted Harry on the arm. Mrs. Weasley shook her head and went back into the kitchen while Harry settled back into the couch and talked with Ginny about a few different things but soon they were discussing their plans for the house with Ginny going into detail about the furnishings she had selected. Harry's favorite chair, which he had imported from the continent, was to be the centerpiece of the library, along with a new desk and desk chair, the chess set and a leather couch for visitors. She was describing the new dining room when the kitchen door opened and a not quite two year old whirlwind entered followed by her parents.

It was a testament to Harry's improved mood that it took less than two minutes from the time Victoire arrived to when the house was filled with the sounds of her screaming and laughing as she was tickled by her 'unc 'arry'. Harry then sat the little girl down on the couch next to Ginny so he could receive the full treatment from Fleur.

"Ah, mon frere'. That ees what I was 'oping for. I see you are feeleeng much better, yes?"

"Yes, Fleur. I still have some concerns to work through but all in all I'm doing much better," Harry replied.

Bill completed the greetings with a handshake with his now full time colleague. Ginny received all her greetings from the couch. She had made it clear that she wasn't going to be getting up and down for everyone that was expected for dinner. She sat with Fleur on one side and little Victoire on the other and was quickly consumed in an

even greater detailed discussion about the new house. Bill and Harry took seats in a couple of chairs and discussed Harry's visit to Ollivander's.

"So how's the old fellow getting along, Harry?" Bill asked.

"He looks kind of worn out, Bill, but he seems as sharp as ever. Took him a while to come up with a good match, sort of like the first time, but at least this wand doesn't have any of the 'heritage' as my old one."

"May I?" Bill asked.

Harry produced his wand and handed it to Bill. He took it with a raised eyebrow and then laughed a bit as he felt its heft.

"I don't know, Harry. Are you sure you didn't ask him for a bludger bat by mistake."

"Ironwood and dragon sinew. I guess the only thing missing is a couple of iron bands to hold it all together," Harry said with a smirk.

"It certainly is stout. How is it for delicate work? Will you have any problems with transfiguring?"

"It seems ok, Bill. I tried a few things at the shop and they all worked out alright," Harry replied.

They continued to talk a bit more 'shop' when the next guests to arrive interrupted the conversation. Charlie arrived with Eleanor. As Charlie shook hands with Harry, Eleanor exchanged greetings with Fleur and Ginny. When she shifted her attention to Harry her smile was wide and bright but her eyes were shiny with tears. She pulled Harry tightly to herself and squeezed as hard as she could. She held on for a while with Harry holding her and rubbing her back. When she finally let go and pulled back enough so that Harry could look at her eye-to-eye she sniffed a bit and said quietly,

"I know I said some pretty harsh things to you that time, Harry, but if they had anything at all, even the littlest, tiniest bit, to do with you getting out of that place, I'm glad I said them."

"I'm glad you said them, too, El. For lots of reasons," Harry said and then with a last hug he turned his attention back to Charlie.

"I need to have a chat with you, Charlie. Something interesting has come up," Harry said gesturing for Charlie to take a seat.

"What's up, Harry? Something new for the Quidditch camp?"

"Something a bit more serious than that. The Minister was by earlier today. Came out to see how I was getting along and to thank me again. While we were talking he mentioned what a mess the Mysteries Department was."

"Well, you did manage to break it up a bit, Harry," Bill said with a smile.

"Please, don't remind me. But he was referring to more than just the physical damage I did. What with the hybrid dragon business and now this, most of the personnel are gone, the records are a mess and no one much knows what's been going on down there for some time now. The Minister is looking for someone to try and pull it all together again and sort it all out. I suggested you."

"Me?" Charlie asked incredulously. "Harry, when did I ever give any indication that I wanted a job at the Ministry? I'm a field researcher, you know that."

"I do know that, Charlie. I wasn't suggesting a permanent posting. The fact that you are an experienced researcher would be a big plus in trying to get to the bottom of what's been going on down there. I also brought up the fact that you have lots of contacts with other researchers that might be able to help. Think of it as another project. This way the Minister can take his time selecting someone to head it up on a permanent basis."

"I don't know, Harry," Charlie said. "What do you think, El, Bill?"

“Personally, I think it would be a great idea, Charlie. You’d be doing something important for the community and who knows where it might lead. It certainly wouldn’t hurt to have helped out the Ministry the next time you go looking for a research grant,” she said.

“I have to agree, Charlie,” his big brother added. “You would lend a lot of credibility to the investigation. You’d be coming from outside yet you’d be tied in with us and Harry. We do have a bit of a reputation for being on the right side in all of this.”

“Well, let me think on it, alright. It does sound intriguing but I’m so used to being out in the wilds, on my own, more or less. Of course I am in between projects right now, except for the book thing. Just give me a bit of time to decide, ok?”

“I didn’t make any promises, Charlie. I just said I’d mention it to you,” Harry replied.

As the afternoon progressed, the rest of the Weasley clan arrived with the exception of Percy and Audrey. Percy was out of the country on Ministry business and Audrey had gone along. Once Harry had finished his conversation with Charlie he asked Kreacher to bring down the chess set and in next to no time Ron and Eleanor were locked in combat. They were both great favorites with the antique chess pieces and the game was punctuated with spirited single combat and numerous taunts and jeers.

Harry watched from the couch where his niece split her time between playing games with him and dashing over to see what was going on with little Fred. It was perhaps an hour before dinner when Victoire ran out of steam and she climbed up onto Harry’s lap, leaned back against his chest and promptly fell asleep. Harry held on to her gently. He noticed Fleur and Mrs. Weasley regarding him intently. He gave them a questioning look but they simply shook their heads as if to say ‘nothing, we’re just looking’.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly. When it was time for dinner, Fleur collected her daughter, who was still sound asleep, which allowed Harry to help Ginny up off the couch and escort her to

the dinner table. There was a certain tension in the air, not one of dread, but of happy anticipation of Ginny's first child being born. Much like the wedding of her and Harry, the idea that the first Weasley daughter in generations becoming a mother was something special, or perhaps more special since any birth was a special occasion.

This much anticipated event arrived close on the heels of the weekend. Harry was back at Hogwarts, sitting at the faculty table having lunch midday on Thursday. He was having a casual conversation with Bill but his mind was on Ginny as it usually was if he wasn't deeply involved in something. As they chatted he felt a sharp jab in his head. He shook it off, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes. He had been reading a great deal lately and he thought maybe he needed an eye exam, it had been quite a while. He started talking again and about ten minutes later he felt another sharp pain. He also heard an exclamation from the far end of the Ravenclaw table. He looked up and saw a commotion where the six years sat.

A student who had been blocking his line of sight moved and he saw Abigail holding her head but looking in his direction. When their eyes met she nodded and managed a weak smile. Harry immediately realized what was going on. He stood up quickly and looked at Professor McGonagall.

"Professor. It's Ginny. I think the baby is coming," he said in a rush.

"Off you go, Harry. We'll handle things here. Please keep us informed," she replied with a small smile.

"Yes, ma'am and thank you," he said, then turned to Bill. "I'm off. Be back when I can."

"Get going, Harry. We'll keep an eye on things for you."

Harry hurried down off the dais. Although he hadn't needed it in days, he had been carrying his cane about, just in case. It lay forgotten behind his chair. He was quickly out the front doors and moving down the wet gravel path that was still atop the bit of snow that remained.

The last week of March and the first few days of April had been warm enough to continue the melting of the historic snow pack. Once he was outside the gate he Disapparated to the backyard of the Burrow and he was through the kitchen door in less than a moment.

"Harry," called Mrs. Weasley from the kitchen. "How did you know? We only just sent off the owl."

"I felt a couple of sharp pains, so did Abigail. I figured it was the baby. How is Ginny? Is she upstairs?"

"Ginny is doing just fine, my dear. The contractions started early this morning but only just recently got really going. She is upstairs in your room. The midwife is here and so are a couple of visitors," Mrs. Weasley said with a smile.

"Visitors?" Harry asked, confused.

"St. Mungo's sent out a healer and nurse. Apparently the midwife had tipped them off. Seems more than a few people are interested in the first child of Mr. and Mrs. Potter."

"Should I go up or what?" Harry asked.

From the look on Harry's face and most likely it was the same look as nearly all about-to-be fathers had, this was one area where he was completely adrift. She smiled sympathetically and said,

"Why don't you stay here for a moment, Harry? I'll let Ginny know you're here and if she wants to see you I'll give a shout."

"Oh, ok, sure, Mum."

Harry sat down and poured himself a cup of tea from the kettle Mrs. Weasley had set on the table before she went back upstairs. He had watched her ascend the stairs and he thought he heard the sound of a shout but he felt no pain. He wondered why he had before. After trying to think about it for a few moments, a thought wormed its way forward until he could recognize it fully. It had to be Abigail. He suspected that she had been keeping 'watch' on Ginny and when the

contractions had become strong enough the pain radiated through the little witch to him. He hoped that she had the sense to 'switch off' her talent to save herself the unpleasantness now that he was home.

"Harry?" Mrs. Weasley called out.

Harry bolted from his chair and hurried to the bottom of the staircase.

"Harry, dear. Ginny said to tell you that she and I quote "under no circumstances wants you to see her like this and you'll just have to wait like an expectant father should". I'm sorry, dear," she said with a kind smile.

"It's ok, Mum. I guess I understand. Please tell her I love her."

"Of course, dear. Now try and relax."

Harry went back to his tea. Having grown up in a muggle household he was aware, if very indirectly, that it was common for muggle fathers to be there with the mother during childbirth. But he was also well aware that witches and wizards had a strong streak of 'old fashion' and this is what he was dealing with now. So he topped off his tea cup and took it with him into the living room to sit and wait. In the back of his mind, a cold, reptilian voice was telling him that this was a very natural thing and the presence of the father was superfluous at best. Harry thought back that they might be true of dragons but we aren't dealing with egg laying here. That little corner of his mind got very quiet but he thought he sensed a very huffy grunt before it did.

The downstairs quiet was punctuated by the occasional yell and Harry noticed that they seemed to be coming closer and closer together. As the afternoon wore on he got some company. Apparently, Mrs. Weasley had sent Kreacher off to inform a few members of the family and Harry was joined by Mr. Weasley, Fleur, Victoire, and shortly before dinner time, Angelina. Kreacher had returned and he took it upon himself to prepare some food for a simple, serve-yourself, dinner.

Despite his usual ravenous hunger, Harry only managed to pick at a few bits and pieces and spent much of his time pacing around the room. The others did their best to keep him occupied but even the irrepressible Victoire couldn't keep him distracted for long. Mrs. Weasley made an occasional trip downstairs for this or that and to keep them apprised. Ginny was doing well, all signs were positive and at her request the room had been spelled to keep the sound from getting too loud since she didn't want to upset anyone with her yelling.

It was around eight thirty in the evening when a gentle voice called down from the top of the staircase.

"Harry. You can come up now," Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry hesitated for a moment and with a gentle push from Mr. Weasley he made his way to the bottom of the stairs and then climbed up. His 'mother' gave him a brief hug and then with a hand on his back, ushered him into the room. It was obvious that some time had been spent getting the room cleaned and ordered. The midwife, healer and nurse were standing on the far side, looking at Harry and smiling widely. They might as well have been three ogres for all Harry paid them any attention. His entire focus was on his wife and the small bundle she held to her. She was obviously tired but her smile was bright and her face glowed.

"Say hello to your, son, James," she said softly.

Harry stepped closer and looked down. All that was visible was a wrinkly face and a pair of pink hands clutched in fists. There was a thin thatch of dark hair on the small head. He couldn't tell what color eyes the new born had.

"He's beautiful," was all Harry could say.

"I thought boys were supposed to be handsome," Ginny teased.

"No, you were right about that. He's beautiful and so are you," he replied as he bent down and kissed her forehead.

Ginny patted a space on the bed next to her and Harry gingerly sat down. He reached out with a finger and gently touched one of the tiny hands, which opened and quickly closed on his finger. Harry felt a chill run down his spine. It was the most amazing thing he had ever encountered, and for Harry that was saying quite a bit. Harry was oblivious to the fact that the midwife, healer and nurse were taking their leave of Mrs. Weasley.

His concentration was finally broken by a hand that had come to rest on his shoulder. Mrs. Weasley said,

“Harry. It’s time to let Ginny get some sleep. Things went well but it’s still a very tiring experience. Why don’t you go downstairs and share the good news and I’ll be along in a bit.”

“What, oh, ok, sure, Mum,” he said then leaned into to give Ginny a short but heartfelt kiss and then he whispered in her ear.

When he pulled back, Mrs. Weasley could see her daughter grinning from ear to ear. With a last touch of the tiny hands Harry eased himself off the bed and then he backed his way out of the room, not wanting to look away from his family. Once in the corridor he stopped to catch his breath and consider this most momentous of events. With a shake of his head he turned and made his way down the staircase to accept the enthusiastic congratulations of the rest of his family.

Harry's Future, Part 44

It was getting close to midnight and Harry was left alone in the living room, sitting on the couch, staring into the fireplace. Once it was evident that all was well with mother, child and father, Fleur and Angelina had departed for their own homes with promises to return the next day. Mr. Weasley had retired for the night with one more handshake and congratulations for his 'son'. As he pondered the events of the day Harry was shaken from his thoughts by someone sitting down on the couch next to him. He looked over into the serene face of Mrs. Weasley. She smiled at him and said,

"I just looked in and they are both doing fine. You should think about getting some sleep yourself, my dear. You've had a long day."

"I had the easy part, Mum. I just had to wait."

"That can be just as tiring, Harry. Just ask Arthur. I suggest you plan on going back up to school. Your students need you and the next few days are going to be pretty hectic with the frequent feedings and such," Mrs. Weasley said.

"In other words, dads aren't all that necessary at this point?" Harry said with a smirk.

"Well, no, dear, that's not what I meant. It's just that there will be lots of us here to help and you have your responsibilities."

"If you think that's best, I guess you're the expert, Mum," Harry said, then a quizzical look crossed his face. "Do you know what today's date is? I can't recall."

"It's the fourth of April, Harry."

Harry just smiled and leaned over to give Molly a hug. With a pat on Harry's knee she stood up and made her way towards her own room. Harry kicked off his shoes and lay down on the couch and pulled a blanket over himself. He was soon fast asleep but he spent the night dreaming. What little he remembered in the morning when he awoke was of him flying in dragon form in wide circles around the Burrow

scanning the skies and ground for any hint of trouble. It was a dream that would often reoccur in many forms for years to come.

After he had rubbed the sleep from his eyes and put on his glasses he could see that Mr. Weasley was already at the table. Hearing Harry stirring the elder Weasley looked over and said,

“Good morning, Harry. How did you sleep last night?”

“Pretty well, Dad. A bit of a dragon dream but otherwise quiet,” Harry replied.

“Dragon dream?”

“Yes, sir. I think I was just flying around the area of the Burrow. Like I was on patrol. It was like the one I had before the second hybrid showed up, only it was just around here.”

Mr. Weasley nodded and said,

“That’s understandable I suppose. I’d have to think you have even more reason to feel protective of the place now.”

Harry gave a small smile as he made his way to the table and helped himself to a cup of tea from the kettle on the table. Assuming that Mrs. Weasley was busy with something to do with Ginny and James, Harry wandered into the kitchen and rummaged around for something to eat. He was interrupted by a voice.

“And just what do you think your doing in my kitchen, young man?”

“Oh, good morning, Mum. I thought you were busy upstairs so I was just looking for something quick to eat before I left for Hogwarts,” Harry replied.

“You sit yourself down at the table and I’ll tend to your breakfast. Ginny and the baby have had theirs and they are resting. You can go up and see them before you leave for the day. Since its Friday I assume you’ll be back for the weekend.”

"Yes, ma'am. I have a full schedule today but I'll leave right after and be here in time for dinner," Harry replied. "I remember what you said about the next few days but I just don't think I should be away."

Mrs. Weasley gave him a knowing smile and did indeed tend to his breakfast. Harry left feeling full. His appetite had been rebounding since that bad day at the Ministry and with the knowledge that his wife and child were healthy and in good hands he demolished two full plates of eggs, bacon, toast and at the insistence of his 'mum', a fair amount of fruit. When he was done he went upstairs and knocked very softly on the door to his and Ginny's room.

"Come in," came the equally soft reply.

Harry slowly pushed open the door and saw Ginny sitting up in bed with little James cradled in her arms. Her face bore all the signs of new motherhood. Her smile was soft and her eyes looked a little tired but joyful nonetheless. She looked at Harry and her smile widened.

"Hello there, handsome."

"Hello, beautiful," Harry replied as he approached the bed.

He looked down at his wife and son and he couldn't help but smile. James looked to be sleeping. Then he said,

"How are my two favorite people doing?"

"We're both doing fine, Harry. I'm still feeling a bit tired but Mum is making it so much easier. It's been a long time since I've seen her so happy. Are you heading back up to school?"

"Yes, Mum suggested I should since you two will be lazing about and I'd likely just be in the way," he said with a grin.

"She said no such thing and you're so horrible to suggest it," Ginny said with a laugh. "Now give us both a kiss and be on your way. I'm sure there are lots of people up there eager to hear about your new son."

“Our new son,” Harry corrected her as he leaned in to kiss her and then to press his lips lightly to James’ forehead.

“I’ll see you late this afternoon,” he said as he straightened up.

“I believe we should still be here,” Ginny replied with an impish grin.

Harry smiled and then quietly backed out of the room, not wanting to look away until it was absolutely necessary. He got to the bottom of the staircase and when he saw his ‘parents’ looking at him he couldn’t keep from breaking into a huge smile. With a hug for both his mum and dad Harry went to the backyard and Disapparated to Hogwarts.

It was a little before nine in the morning so Harry hurried up the wet gravel path through the ever decreasing snow pack. He let himself into the castle and made his way perhaps half a dozen paces into the foyer when he was met by a diminutive, dark haired projectile who threw herself at Harry.

“Hey there, little one. What’s all this about?”

“Sorry, Harry, um, sir. Or should I say ‘dad’. I’m just so happy. I was watching you last night and again this morning. I was even able to ‘see’ the baby when you did last night. He’s so adorable. I can’t wait to see him for real,” she enthused in her breathy voice.

“Well, I think we might be able to arrange that. At lunch I’ll speak to Professor Flitwick to get permission to bring you to the Burrow for the weekend,” Harry said.

“Um, won’t you have to get the anteroom fireplace back onto the floo network? We haven’t used it in a while.”

“No problem, little one. We can use the fireplace at the house in Hogsmeade. We still have the lease and I left some floo powder there,” he explained.

Abigail was all smiles and with a last hug for Harry she dashed off to get ready for her first class of the morning. Harry smiled as she

hurried off and he made his way to his classroom. Harry managed to surprise himself in that he was able to concentrate on his class work despite what he had experienced the day before. There were some questions at the start of each of the two classes that morning that he was more than happy to answer. One question did throw him, however. One of the seventh year witches asked how big James was at birth, 'you know, Professor, how long and how heavy'. Harry had to honestly answer that he didn't know and hadn't thought to ask. This got him rolled eyes from more than just the questioner.

Disregarding that one bump, his morning had been rather smooth and he was in a very good mood when he took his place at the faculty table. When Bill arrived Harry was obliged to stand and get a bear hug as the students were filing in. The congratulations from the rest of the faculty were more subdued but no less sincere. When Hagrid stumped up the steps of the dais Harry could see there was a broad smile under the shaggy beard and his eyes were bright.

"Congratulations, Harry," Hagrid said.

"And congratulations to you, Hagrid," Harry responded with a smile. "You're a godfather now."

"Yeah, ain't that summat. Can't wait ta meet 'em."

"Well, we should be in the new house in a few weeks. That should be a good time for you to pay us a visit," Harry said.

"That'd be terrific, Harry. I'll do that."

As promised, Harry left the grounds right after his last class, having first collected Abigail who was waiting for him at the front door. They walked quickly to the small house that Harry and Ginny had rented and let themselves in. Harry sent Abigail off through the fireplace first, smiling slightly at the barely audible squeal as his ward disappeared in the flash of green. Harry counted to ten and then followed behind. As Harry stepped out into the living room he saw that Mrs. Weasley was in the kitchen working on dinner but had paused to wrap her cook's assistant in a hug.

“Harry, dear. Right on time. Ginny and the baby are up in your room. Go on up and say your hellos. This one can help me with dinner.”

“Can’t I go up and see Ginny and James?” Abigail asked from the circle of Mrs. Weasley’s arms.

“In a bit, my dear. Let Harry have a few moments and then I’ll take you up,” Mrs. Weasley said with a kind smile.

Abigail smiled and nodded her understanding. Harry made his way quietly up the stairs and knocked softly then entered. He saw Ginny in the same position as when he left in the morning only now her eyes were closed. Her wealth of red hair was fanned out on the pillow behind her head. Harry slowly moved over to the bassinette that held James. He, too, was asleep.

“Try not to wake him, sweetheart. He was a bit fussy this afternoon,” Ginny said in a low voice.

“Is he alright?” Harry asked, sounding just a bit alarmed.

“Yes, Harry, he’s just being a baby. Fussy is allowed,” she replied with a smirk.

Harry moved to the side of the bed and leaned over to kiss his wife. He sat down on the side of the bed and gave her a hug as best he could without disturbing her. She responded with a bit more vigor.

“It’s alright to squeeze a bit, sweetie. I’m not going to fall apart.”

Harry pulled her to him a bit tighter. He felt her lean into him and sigh.

“Mmm, now that’s much better.”

They continued to hold each other for a few moments until another knock was heard at the door. Harry smiled and said,

“That would be Abigail.”

“The whole family together,” Ginny said with a smile and then looking towards the door called out, “Come in.”

The door swung in and a head full of dark hair poked in. Ginny crooked a finger and Abigail hurried in and climbed up on the bed to wrap her arms around Ginny and Harry. When she let go she looked over towards the bassinette and then back to Ginny with a questioning glance.

“Go ahead but be careful.”

Abigail slid off the bed and tiptoed with exaggerated care to the side of the bassinette to peer down at the sleeping baby. She stood there without moving for several moments and then looked back at Harry and Ginny with tears standing in her eyes. She turned and quietly made her way back to the bed and climbed back up. Harry had loosened his hold somewhat on Ginny and Abigail burrowed her way in so that she could wrap her surrogate mother tightly in her arms with her faced buried in Ginny’s shoulder. Ginny put her arms around the little witch and stroked her hair and murmured in her ear. When Abigail finally looked up her eyes were still wet but her smile was warm and genuine.

“What’s all this then?” Harry asked.

“We are a real family after all, aren’t we?” she asked.

“Yes, we are,” he replied.

“I think I’m going to like having a little brother,” she said barely above a whisper.

“And I’m sure he’s going to like having you for big sister,” Ginny added.

They shared a last hug and then Harry suggested he and Abigail go down for dinner. Ginny thought that was a good idea because she’d like to catch a quick nap. She assured them both she intended to be down for breakfast in the morning. This got a smile from both of them.

Harry and Abigail quietly left and walked back down to the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley smiled at them and said,

“So, what would you say to some dinner?”

“I would say ‘yes, thank you’,” Harry replied while Abigail nodded.

Harry and Abigail made their way to the table and took their seats. Mr. Weasley was due to be a little late so it would just be the three of them. When she joined them, Molly said,

“I must say, my dears, that as much as I enjoy having the whole family about, these quiet little meals are a nice change of pace. So, Abigail, how have you been getting on?”

“Fine, Mrs. Weasley. It’s been another good year at school and just regular exams to worry about. Next year should be a challenge with NEWTs,” Abigail replied.

“Which ones are you going to sit for?” Harry asked.

“Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, Herbology, DADA, Charms, and Transfiguration.”

“Hmm, sounds familiar,” Harry said with a smile.

“You set a good example, Harry, but don’t you remember? I gave you a copy of my schedule this year,” Abigail said with a straight face.

Harry just shook his head and said,

“No, I guess I’ve been a bit distracted lately.”

“Pardon me for sounding confused, but aren’t you taking Harry’s Applied Magic course, Abigail?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“Yes, ma’am, but there’s no NEWT for it,” Abigail replied.

Mrs. Weasley looked at Harry with a quizzical expression. He just shrugged and said,

“For one thing it’s a new course and after what Professor McGonagall has told me, it’s temporary. Plus it serves more as a bridge between some of the others like DADA, charms, and so forth so it would be hard to have a separate NEWT. What I’m hoping is that it will help the students going for their NEWTs in those courses.”

“I think it will, Harry. What you’ve been discussing and working on with us has given me a different perspective on how to combine different aspects of the other branches of magic. I know most of the other students feel the same way. But what do you mean by temporary? Aren’t you going to continue with it?” Abigail asked.

“No, little one. Professor McGonagall has a plan to take what we’ve been doing in Applied Magic and use it to update the other courses so that it becomes something taught to all the students right from year one. After a few years, I’m going to become the full time Transfiguration teacher. It hasn’t been announced so keep it under your hat, alright?”

“Of course, Harry,” Abigail said breathlessly. “Wow, that’s amazing. Not only will you be impacting basic magical education but you’ll be following Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore as Transfiguration Professor.”

Mrs. Weasley looked at Harry with a small smile and said,

“You know, my dear, your parents would have been so very proud of you. I know we, Arthur and me, certainly are.”

Harry started to blush a bit but was pulled up short by what Abigail said.

“Oh, they are, Mrs. Weasley. They’ve told me that on more than one occasion.”

It never ceased to amaze Harry how this young witch could speak so easily about something that was so fundamentally incredible. It also gave him a thrill, and a sense of contentment perhaps, to know that at least in some way that James and Lily Potter were still a part of his

life. When he looked down at his ward, or perhaps daughter would be more accurate, she looked back and smiled that knowing smile he had come to recognize so well.

It was a quiet, pleasant evening with just Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Harry and Abigail sitting in the living room chatting about this and that. One topic of interest was whether or not Charlie was going to accept the Minister's now formal offer to head up the 'clean up' of the Mysteries Department. Mr. Weasley had had a long talk with his son during the week and Charlie appeared to be leaning in the direction of accepting. Near the end of the discussion Charlie had been musing about who might be appropriate to have on his team.

"His first choice on his wish list was you, Harry, but he knew there wasn't much chance there. He's also concerned that it would cut into his time and possibly keep him from being part of this year's Quidditch camp," Mr. Weasley said.

"Well, he's right that I wouldn't be available to work on his team but I could probably help out a bit. I figure I owe him that much since it was my idea in the first place," Harry replied.

The evening wound down around ten o'clock with Abigail taking her usual room and Harry taking one of the other guest rooms. He thought Ginny needed at least one more night to herself to rest. He slept well but he was sure he heard James at least once during the night. He was also sure that the dragon was on the watch, even if it was just in his dreams. When he awoke on Saturday morning it was with a full heart and empty stomach. He dressed quickly and hurried downstairs. He wasn't going to intrude on Ginny until she was ready to come down.

"Harry, dear. Sit yourself down, breakfast is almost ready," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Good morning, Master Harry," Kreacher said from near the stove.

"Morning, Mum. Hello there, Kreacher. I dunno, Mum, are you sure that you're going to want to let Kreacher go once the new house is ready?" Harry said with a smile.

"I'm certain I couldn't keep him here if a wanted to, Harry, but I must say it has been helpful to have him about when there are more than a few visitors," she responded.

"It is true that Kreacher must go to the new house when it is ready, but Kreacher could always come to help Mrs. Weasley on those occasions when there is much to be done," Kreacher offered.

"Thank you, that is very kind, Kreacher," Mrs. Weasley replied.

"You could always hire a house elf for yourself, Mum," Harry suggested.

"Oh, I don't think so, Harry. Besides, most of the time it's just Arthur and me and I wouldn't need the help."

Harry just shrugged a bit. He was just getting started on his second helping when he heard soft footsteps coming down the stairs. He looked over and saw Ginny walking down carefully with a wrapped bundle in her arms.

"Good morning, everyone. I thought it was time that we were up and about. Although James here picked the timing. As for me I would love some breakfast."

Harry got up and came forward to meet his wife and son. Ginny smiled and said,

"Harry, be a love and take James for a few minutes while I get myself situated."

"What? Me?" Harry asked, a bit panicky.

"Yes, you. You are his father after all. Hold him just like this. Support his head this way and the rest of him like that. That's it, sweetheart," she encouraged him as she transferred James over.

When Harry stood with full possession of his young son he stood so still it appeared he had been struck with an 'Immobulus' charm. Ginny

looked at him and then turned to her mother with a look of near disgust.

“Can someone explain to me how a man who has faced death, combated evil demons and defeated dragons could be so terrified of so small a creature as an infant child?”

“It’s because if I dropped one of those others I wouldn’t have cared one bit. Since this is my one and only son I’m quite a bit more concerned,” Harry ground out through clenched teeth.

“Harry, dear. Just think of him as a rather large snitch. You’ve never dropped one of those in your life, so perhaps that might help,” Mrs. Weasley suggested with a smile.

Harry took a deep breath and tried to relax. His mum was right. He had very sure hands and was generally quite coordinated so what was he worrying about. He looked down at the small bundle in his arms and smiled a bit and gave an experimental rock. At about the same time he felt a soft, warm, gossamer like touch on the back of his neck and head. It was very much like he had felt that time in the graveyard at Godric’s Hollow. He tried to let his senses open up but he couldn’t feel or ‘hear’ anything more. He did look over at Abigail and she nodded in return. When he looked down at James he was sure the little mouth was pulled up in a small smile. It would seem that the newborn boy had just met his other grandmother.

All told it was a wonderful weekend. Harry was able to spend a good deal of time with Ginny since it appeared she was recovering quickly. A small baby carrier was used downstairs so that James could be kept close by and he got a great deal of attention during the short periods that he was awake. Abigail had taken a small sketch pad from her school bag and done several quick studies of the baby or Ginny and James together. She promised that there would be a nice painting ready for the new house.

Harry had promised Professor Flitwick that Abigail would be back at school in time for Sunday dinner so late in the afternoon he kissed Ginny and James farewell and promised to return Tuesday evening.

Then he and Abigail stepped into the fireplace and were back at the small house in Hogsmeade in a flash, or two flashes to be precise.

Over the next few weeks Harry settled into a routine that had him at the Burrow over the weekend and on Tuesday nights. He swore that each time he saw his son upon arrival that James was growing visibly larger. His classes kept him busy as did his extra efforts with the students in his Applied Magic classes who were up for OWLs and NEWTs. Two interesting events took place during these weeks of April.

The first occurred indirectly as a result of Harry's improved knee and his good mood. He had taken to walking through the corridors and up and down the staircases reacquainting himself with these previously off limit sections of the school and as a way to supplement his therapy sessions with exercise that couldn't be taken outside since the melting snow had turned much of the grounds soggy, if not downright swampy. On one such occasion he happened upon two wizards that he recognized as fifth years squaring off against each other in one of the upper hallways, wands out.

"What's all this then?" he said in a loud, firm voice.

At the sound of his question the two would-be combatants froze, then looked in his direction and finally bolted, or tried to. Harry, without even drawing his new wand, shouted 'Immobulus' which froze the two in their tracks. Harry took his time walking up to and then around the frozen youngsters. Their faces were set in an expression of panic and Harry stood, arms folded, examining the two. One was a Hufflepuff, the other a Gryffindor. Harry mumbled a phrase and the spell dissipated.

As they were released from the charm the two students took stumbling steps towards Harry and came to a halt at arms length from his stern visage. Harry had once seen a deer frozen in the headlights of Uncle Vernon's Volvo and these two were doing a fine imitation.

"So, perhaps one or both of you would care to explain just what it was you were planning on doing?"

Neither spoke.

"I assume you both had something in mind, otherwise you wouldn't have been in this far corner of the castle with your wands out and pointed at each other," Harry said quietly, both eyebrows pulling down behind his glasses.

The boys looked at each other and then back at their Professor but neither would, or could, speak.

"Gentlemen, if I have to ask you again what it was you were getting ready to do, I will become annoyed, perhaps even angry. Are either of you prepared to deal with that?"

The Gryffindor fifth year swallowed once, then again and finally opened his mouth.

"It..it was nothing, sir. Just a little disagreement is all."

"Do you wish me to believe that you were prepared to break any number of school rules, to include the prohibitions against dueling and using magic on each other, over a little disagreement?"

The Gryffindor wizard-in-training gulped but the Hufflepuff's nerve broke and he blurted out,

"He won't stop talking about her."

The other young wizard glared at his antagonist but didn't say anything. Harry looked at the Hufflepuff and said,

"Her?"

"Yes, sir. He's got no business nosing around someone from another house."

Harry fixed his bright green eyes on the now talkative young man. The boy gulped and then added,

"Sir."

“So what you’re telling me is that you were getting ready to duel in the corridors of the school over a girl?” Harry asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“I see. And has the young lady in question expressed any preference?” he probed further.

“Sir?” asked the Hufflepuff.

“Has the girl you’re fighting over ever said which one of you she likes?”

The two looked at one another and then they both got very interested in the ends of their shoes. Harry had a brief flash of inspiration and had to try very hard to keep a serious look on his face.

“Are you telling me, or not telling me as the case may be, that you’ve never talked to her about this, either one of you?”

Two heads moved side to side in the negative. Harry pushed it a little further.

“Have either of you talked to her at all?”

Again two head shakes. Harry added a rueful shake of his own.

“Look at me,” and when they did he continued. “I want to see the both of you at the first year end of the Slytherin table tonight when dinner is done. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” they chorused.

“I will grant you this. I will not deduct any points from either house. I’m afraid that if you had to explain why you lost that many points, and it would be substantial, you’d never live it down. Now off with the two of you and I’ll see you later this evening.”

With a brief hesitation the two turned on their heels and hurried off away from Harry. There was another reason why he had been lenient on the two. He remembered how he had made such a fool of himself on several occasions where girls were concerned and he understood how stupidly boys could behave under those kinds of circumstances.

So it was as the rest of the students were filing out of the Great Hall after dinner that evening the two young wizards slowly approached the end of the table where Harry now stood. On the table were two large bottles of furniture polish and two large cloths. The two boys eyed the bottles warily.

"Very prompt. Good. Nothing fancy, gentlemen. One of you to a side. You start at this end and finish at the junior end of the Gryffindor table where I'll be seated. That includes the benches. Go to it," Harry instructed.

"Yes, sir."

Harry made his way over to the end of the Gryffindor table and sat down and began to work his way through some homework papers. After a while Bill came over and sat down.

"What's all this about, Harry?"

Harry explained what he had stumbled across and by the time he was done Bill was doing all he could to keep from laughing. The he shook his head.

"Hmm, I suppose I should have a talk with that young fellow from my house, but I can't imagine anything I could do would be more terrifying then having to stand face to face with you in one of the remotest corridors."

"What's that supposed to mean, Bill?" Harry asked.

"Harry, it's a well known fact that you are very popular with and greatly respected by the students here. But lets not forget that with all of your accomplishments, and a number of them in very spectacular and often frightening circumstances, I can't think of a single student

who wouldn't be scared witless at the thought of you glaring at them with those flashing green eyes, let alone go through it for real," Bill finished.

Harry looked at his brother-in-laws scarred face and then past his shoulder to see the two boys starting work on the Hufflepuff table. He thought back on the looks of panic and fear on their faces while he was confronting them.

"I hadn't thought about that, Bill. Are they really that scared of me?" he asked anxiously.

"Not in general terms. Not like we all were of say, Professor Snape. But I have heard students this year say they'd do anything to not get on your bad side, as if you actually had one. Don't be too concerned about it, Harry. Just keep it in mind when you find yourself having to discipline someone, that's all."

"Thanks, Bill. I'm glad you told me. I mean it," Harry replied.

Bill gave Harry a smile and then moved off. It took about an hour for the two to finish up after Bill left and find themselves standing in front of Harry once more. Harry looked up at them from the perspective of his conversation with Bill and he motioned for them to sit down. Once they were settled he gave them a small smile and said,

"If I might, I'd like to offer you both some advice. It comes from some hard won experience. When I was about your age, give or take a year, I had to struggle with the whole boy-girl thing and it turned out to be a disaster. I managed to mess up with two very nice girls and spent the next two years trying to work out how I felt about a third. Fortunately I managed, in the end, to get that one right.

"If I learned anything, however small, it was this. It all comes down to straight forward honesty. No games, no stunts. Honesty with yourself and with the person who has caught your attention. If you honestly think that that attention is mutual then approach her. The idea of the two of you fighting over her without her even knowing about it is pretty silly and in a way rather disrespectful of her. After all, she does have a say in it, wouldn't you think?"

The two looked down at the table and then at each other, finally coming back to make eye contact with Harry.

“Yes, sir,” they replied in unison.

“Alright then. And as to the dueling, no more. If either of you feels you need to try it again, come see me and we can face off,” Harry said with a grin.

This brought their heads up with a start and Harry started to laugh. The boys did too, although their laughter had a bit of a nervous edge to it.

“Off you go then,” Harry said with a wave.

The second significant event of that period began when a small school owl fluttered into his classroom and dropped a note on his desk. It simply stated that he had a visitor awaiting him in the Head’s outer office and would he be so kind as to attend him during his upcoming free period. Since it was so politely worded Harry figured it didn’t have anything to do with the Ministry or his family so he relaxed and continued on with his class.

When Harry finally made his way up the spiral staircase that opened into the outer office area he saw a wizard of middle years sitting in one of the few chairs. As Harry approached him the man stood with a large smile and offered his hand to Harry.

“Dunbar Oglethorpe at your service, Professor Potter. I am the head of the Quidditch Union for the Administration and Betterment of the British League and its Endeavours, or Quabble for short.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Oglethorpe. How can I help you?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I’d say you’ve helped us quite a bit already, Professor. In particular I’m here to talk to you about the Quidditch camp you’ve set up here at Hogwarts,” Oglethorpe replied.

“Well, I did bring back the idea from Beauxbaton but most of the work has been done by Bill and Charlie Weasley,” Harry said.

“Yes, we are aware of the brothers Weasley and their work. However, it was you that recognized the idea and its merits and argued so eloquently to the Department of Magical Games and Sport.”

“Not that it did much good,” Harry said with a snort.

“My dear sir. I’m afraid that nothing you or anyone else could have said would have made any impression on those hidebound fools. One of the reasons that our organization came into being was to try and influence the game outside of the Department. Now that there has been a turnover in the Department’s leadership we have hopes that some headway can be made. Therefore we want to help in any way we can in the execution of your camp.”

“That would be great, Mr. Oglethorpe. I would have to say that you do need to talk to Charlie and Bill. They are the ones that would know how to make use of that kind of assistance. I’m somewhat embarrassed to say it but I’m not much more than a figurehead where the camp is concerned,” Harry said with one of his shrugs and smiles.

“I daresay you are understating the matter, Professor, but I will heed your advice and arrange to meet with both the Weasley brothers as soon as it is convenient for them,” Oglethorpe said with a smile of his own. “I would ask that you continue to give the sport your interest and if you have any further ideas please don’t hesitate to call on me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Oglethorpe, I will. Now that I have a son of my own, I’m sure I’ll be giving the game a lot of thought. Although it will be a few years yet before he gets his first broom.”

“Yes, I saw the birth announcement in the Prophet. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Harry replied. “You know, come to think of it there is something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Certainly.”

“One of the things we started here at the school was the idea of club matches. Student teams not connected with the house teams or house cup play. Another of the Weasley brothers came up with the idea based on muggle football. I wonder if there might be interest in the community for something like that. Amateurs who would just like to play the game for the fun and bragging rights,” Harry said with a smile.

“I would imagine there would be, Professor. Many magical folk play impromptu games when and where they can. I would think there would be a number interested in something more formal. I can’t say I know where they’d be able to play. There aren’t any stadiums outside of the league and they are kept busy with matches and practices.”

“Well, it so happens that I own a tract of land in a fairly secluded area of Derbyshire. It was a old farm that I inherited. It would be out of the way and if the pitches were built more for the players and less for spectators it wouldn’t be hard to spell them to avoid detection by muggles,” Harry mused.

“It sounds very intriguing, Professor. Let me have my discussions with the Weasleys about the camp and then I’ll look into the amateur idea and get back to you.”

“That would be brilliant, Mr. Oglethorpe. You can always reach me through the school.”

“We will be in touch, rest assured, Professor and thank you for your time.”

As Harry made his way to the Great Hall for lunch he was pleased that Ron’s initial idea for the club matches at the school had a chance to spread to the community as a whole. As he sat at the faculty table doing serious damage to the offerings from the kitchen staff he took some time to think about how things were working out. What he was most eagerly awaiting now was the completion of their new home and getting settled in. Considering he was rather dubious about the whole idea of the manor like house when it was first broached, he had to admit he was rather excited about the whole idea.

Harry's Future, Part 45

It was Friday evening of the last weekend in April. Harry was sitting in the living room of the Burrow, his three week old son, James resting quietly in his arms. Since the time when Harry first held him, standing like a statue for fear of dropping the less than two day old child, he had grown more at ease and would happily take his turn, few and far between as they were. Ginny had the proprietary notion common to most mothers that she should do most of the holding. At the moment Harry was exchanging glances with James, green eyes watching brown and vice versa. The dragon side of Harry's nature had also been watching. The cold reptilian voice murmured,

"This one will be a challenge."

This gave Harry a bit of a start and he looked closer at his son as if some sign or portent would make itself known. But after thinking on it a bit he had to admit it didn't take any great insight or an Abigail style vision to realize that James would very likely tend towards non conformity and rule bending. One need only look at the record of the boy's father, paternal grandfather and certain maternal uncles to see that the raw material was in place for future havoc. It could only be hoped that the mother and other maternal uncles might hold the key to some calming influence, not unlike the control rods in a nuclear power reactor.

Harry sighed and then with a smile gave James a few gentle bounces and then said quietly,

"We'll worry about that when the time comes, won't we, James?"

"What are you going to worry about later, Harry?" Ginny asked as she came over to sit next to him.

She held out her hands to indicate Harry should relinquish James but he said with a smile,

"We're doing fine, thank you very much. As to worrying, I was just thinking we shouldn't worry about too much about anything right now."

Ginny hooked Harry's upper with both of hers and looked at him.

"No, we shouldn't. Tomorrow we get to see the new house. I can't wait," she enthused.

"Well, it's not like you haven't seen it before," he replied.

"Harry, I haven't seen it since it started snowing. By the time it all melted around here I was too big to be able to go see it. All I had were Mum and Dad checking on things and describing it to me. It will be so nice to be in our very own house," she said a bit dreamily at the end.

"I dunno, Gin. I've been getting kind of used to the idea of poncing off Mum and Dad," Harry said with a straight face.

Ginny's eyebrows shot up and then she started to giggle, then laugh out loud. Then she snapped her fingers and gestured that it was time to give up the baby to her. Harry, ever the dutiful husband did as his wife demanded. A few moments later a certain aroma indicated to him that the timing couldn't have been more perfect. He heard Ginny snort as she started to stand up.

"Serves me right, I suppose."

Harry was smart enough not to laugh until Ginny had disappeared upstairs to attend to the changing. As he did he caught Mrs. Weasley's eye and she crooked a finger at him. He got up and walked into the kitchen.

"They'll be no poncing in this house, young fella me lad," and she tossed a dish towel to him and he spent the next fifteen minutes drying the dinner dishes and he was happy to do so.

Saturday morning dawned clear and cool. Harry was dreaming of a long leisurely flight over the Scottish Highlands, a particular favorite when an insistent voice began to intrude.

"Harry, Harry. Wake up, sleepy head. Today's the day."

“Hmph? What? Oh, alright,” he said and then let out a long yawn.

Sleeping in the same room with a three week old baby left him a little groggy, not to mention the sun was barely visible over the horizon as he began to drag himself out from under the quilt. Ginny was bustling about, apparently on pure adrenaline and Harry wondered what condition she would be in this evening when it all wore off. He grabbed his kit and shuffled off to the shower, leaving his already tubbed and scrubbed wife to fuss over James.

By the time he was washed and dressed and descending the staircase, Ginny was waiting for him in the kitchen, James’ carrier set on the table. He walked over and looked down at his son who was dozing.

“Good morning, James,” he whispered. “You’re the smart one, I’m thinking.”

He slumped down into his chair and began pouring his morning tea. There was already a plate of toast on the table and he began to work on that. Mrs. Weasley was busy at the stove.

“I’ll be with you in a moment, Harry dear. Just get started with the toast. You’ve a busy day ahead of you,” she said.

“Just me? Aren’t you and Dad coming along?” Harry asked.

“Well, of course we are, Harry. We wouldn’t miss it for the world but it is your house after all, and both Arthur and I have seen the house in different stages of construction,” she replied with a knowing smile. “Am I correct, Ginny?”

“Yes, Mum, although I’ve been resisting telling Harry all about it. I want him to get the full effect when he first sees it,” she said with an answering grin.

Mrs. Weasley carried over a platter with eggs and bacon. Kreacher followed behind her floating two additional platters with sausages, cereal and fruit. Harry’s eyes lit up at the sight of all the food.

"Now eat up. I doubt we'll have much chance for lunch," Mrs. Weasley said.

"I don't know about lunch, but if everything goes as I hope, I'll treat everyone to dinner at the Cauldron," Harry said around a mouth full of toast.

"Should we do that, Harry? James is still only three weeks old. He's not ready for being out in public yet," Ginny stated.

"Oh, I guess I didn't think about that," Harry said, a little crestfallen.

"Don't worry, my dears. James will be just fine with Arthur and me. You two could use an evening to yourselves," Mrs. Weasley.

"Gee, I dunno, Mum," Ginny said, apprehension in her voice.

"Ginny," he mother said flatly. "Just what part about taking care of a baby don't you think I know?"

"Um, sorry, Mum. Just new mother nerves I guess. It would be nice to have a quiet dinner with just Harry," she said, giving Harry a quick smoldering glance that made him gulp.

"Then it's settled. Of course, if Harry winds up hating the house it'll all be moot," Molly said with a straight face

"Oh, Mum, how could you say that, even if it is a joke?" Ginny asked.

Harry just kept eating and then a thought struck him.

"How are we getting there? James isn't really ready to go flying is he?"

"No, dear, he's not. Not for a while yet. We'll be going in your father's car," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Really? Is there enough room for all of us?" Harry asked.

“Well, it seems your father didn’t quite keep his promise about enchanting the Popular. He did use the Enlargement spell on the interior. I just hope that’s the only spell he put on it,” Mrs. Weasley said with some resignation. “He’s out in the garage checking to make sure everything is in order.”

So it was that about an hour later they were all comfortably ensconced in the unnaturally spacious interior of the little car. James’ carrier was securely belted between Harry and Ginny in the rear with the elder Weasleys up front. While no one would mistake the Popular for showroom new it appeared in remarkably good shape. It hummed along without any smoking or backfiring. Harry could see from his place behind Mrs. Weasley that Mr. Weasley was grinning from ear to ear.

“You did a really great job on the car, Dad. It runs beautifully. Even Uncle Vernon couldn’t find fault with how it runs,” Harry said.

“Thanks, Harry,” was all Arthur said.

“I actually like it better than that benighted Anglia,” Mrs. Weasley said. “We’ve taken a few rides over to the house in it and it runs quite well.”

The ride lasted for about thirty minutes. The two lane road they were on was passing through a wooded stretch and since Harry had only made the one trip and from the air, he had no idea where he was. The Popular began to slow and Harry looked out the windows trying to get his bearings.

“Um, where are we?” he asked.

“We’re just about there, my dear. The entrance is just ahead on the left,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“What? Where?” Harry asked, perplexed.

“You’ll see in a moment, Harry,” Mr. Weasley responded as he checked to make sure the road was clear of other traffic.

Then he eased the car to the left and just as it appeared they would bump into several trees they were through and onto a one car wide lane of crushed stone. Harry whistled low in appreciation.

“One of the virtues of having the house built by magical builders, Harry. They’ve applied all their talents to making your new home secure,” Mr. Weasley offered.

The lane didn’t cut straight through the trees. It made several cut backs so that there wasn’t a clear line of sight to the house. After the third turn a wide area of gravel appeared. One car was already parked there as Mr. Weasley pulled in and parked.

“It looks like the company representatives are here already,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“That’s right, Mum. They said they’d be here to make sure everything was ready for us,” Ginny replied.

They all got out of the car with Ginny handing Harry the carrier before she got out. The path leading from the gravel car park likewise took a circuitous path through the remainder of the small wood and kept the house out of view. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had hung back to allow Ginny and Harry to be the first to exit the wood. As they did the elder Weasleys could see Harry come to a sudden stop and gasp. Then he said quite clearly,

“Oh, my.”

The cause of his comment was the sight of the front of his and his family’s new home. He had seen all of the renderings that had been done by Abigail and the company architects but the magnificent reality had been enough to nearly overwhelm him. The house, or manor as it could be rightfully called, was a full two stories with a sharply peaked roof that covered the third storey attic. The façade was gray fieldstone that gave a hint of mauve in the morning sunlight. The window casings were carved stone. The path he and Ginny stood on led to a small portico that covered the entrance which comprised a double door in green with narrow windows on either side. The roof was shingled in dark slate.

The grounds in between the wood and the house consisted of a broad well manicured lawn punctuated with several flowerbeds. Off to their left the lawn merged with a much larger expanse of grass that was more pasture than lawn. In Harry's minds eye he could see kids zipping about on brooms, kids of all sizes and ages. Harry's vision was interrupted by a gentle nudge in his side.

"Wouldn't you like to take a closer look, sweetheart?" she said softly.

Harry simply nodded and resumed walking up the path. His head continued to swivel back and forth as he tried to take it all in. While outwardly calm, almost stunned, internally his emotions were boiling over. Almost as if he hadn't really been paying attention; the reality of his situation came crashing down on him. He, along with his family, his true family, was walking up to the first house he could truly call his own, their own. The orphan who had been cast adrift on a cold Halloween night all those years ago was finally coming home and the realization was almost more than he could deal with.

Harry and Ginny began to mount the steps leading up to the front doors. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley followed behind. They could see Harry's head turning this way and that. When he and Ginny reached the front doors, Harry ran his hand over the woodwork. As if on cue the door swung open and Mr. Basswood of the Salisbury Plains Construction company stood there with a small smile.

"Mr. and Mrs. Potter, I'm pleased to welcome you to your new home. Please come in," he said as he stepped back and to the side.

"Thank you, Mr. Basswood," Ginny said with smile as she stepped into the foyer, holding James in his carrier.

Harry just nodded and followed Ginny with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley coming in behind them. The fieldstone of the exterior gave way to rich woods and ceramic tiling. The level of craftsmanship was exquisite. Harry stood looking around. Even with no furniture or other personalizing items, the house was exerting a strong pull on him. He could only describe the feeling as 'home'.

Mr. Basswood, along with Ms. Trent, took them on a tour of the house, pointing out features or describing how certain techniques were used to obtain a particular effect. Most of it went over Harry's head, or perhaps through it, because later he would be able to recall all that was said, but for the moment he was oblivious. He was taking in every detail. How the joins of the woodwork showed no gaps, nor any tool marks. Ginny was watching her husband with growing unease. He hadn't said a word since his first 'oh, my'.

They saw the kitchen with its numerous cabinets and spacious work surfaces. The racks for the pots and pans stood empty but it was easy to envision the same assortment as now hung in the kitchen of the Burrow. They saw rooms intended for children and guests as well as the suite that would be Harry and Ginny's. Lastly, by happenstance or design, they came to the library, Harry's library. Mr. Basswood took hold of the brass knob and gave it a turn, pushing the heavy door inward.

He stood aside and gestured for Harry to go ahead. Harry took several steps forward until he was just inside the room. He looked around at the wall to ceiling bookcases, the brass rail that ran around the top of the cases that would allow the ladder to move around the room. There was enough room to hold a lifetime worth of books. The wall opposite the door held a large window that gave a view of the large meadow and the hills beyond.

As he stood looking at the view provided by the window he felt a warm hand slip into his. He looked over and down and saw Ginny smiling back up at him, but with a questioning glance. The best he could offer was a small smile and a squeeze of her hand. Mr. Basswood's voice broke in and Ginny turned to talk to him.

"Harry. Harry. Mr. Basswood wants to know if everything is satisfactory," Ginny said.

Harry nodded and went back to contemplating the view from the window. After a short while, Ginny was finally able to get Harry's attention for long enough to sign the papers accepting the house and authorizing the final payment through Gringotts. As Ginny and her parents were saying their farewells to Mr. Basswood and Ms. Trent,

Harry drifted off to roam through the house. When Ginny finally found him, he was sitting on the bottom step of the back staircase.

“Harry. Whatever is the matter with you? I can’t imagine what they thought about how you were acting,” she said. “Will you look at me, please, when I’m talking to you?”

When Harry lifted his head he had a strange, almost haunted look. Whatever consternation Ginny may have been feeling was replaced with concern and she sat down next to Harry on the step. She took hold of his right hand with both of hers.

“What’s wrong, Harry? I thought you liked the idea of the house. Is it too much after all?” she asked.

Harry shook his head in the negative and then looked at Ginny. He finally found his voice.

“No, Ginny. The house is fine. It’s more than fine. It’s magnificent. The fact that it’s a gift from you and from Abigail makes it more so. It’s just a little overwhelming, I guess. I’ve never had a home of my own or a family. Now I have you and James and Abigail and this house. I don’t know how I can explain it. It’s like I finally feel whole,” he finished and then went silent again.

Ginny looked at him in amazement and then said,

“Harry, how can you say that? You’ve been part of a family for years now and you’ve had a home in the Burrow for just as long. You’ve said so yourself.”

“It’s not the same,” he murmured. “The Burrow, the Black house, they weren’t really mine. They were borrowed. Even your family was borrowed, for a while at least. I don’t know how to explain it.”

Ginny looked at him and she remembered something. She took one hand and placed it on Harry’s face.

“You don’t have to. I won’t insult you by saying I understand, Harry. I don’t think I ever can, really. I remember something you said to me. It

was on the Express, going back to school after the Christmas break when we were seventh years together. You were explaining to me how you felt about us, about your 'family'. How bad it was living with the Dursleys and how much it meant to you to have finally found a family to be part of."

"It was a start, Ginny. Well, not a start but I guess you could say it was part of a journey that started that first day on the platform with you, your mom and your brothers. A journey that has finally, I think, brought me home," he finished with a small smile.

Ginny smiled back and then wrapped her arms around Harry's shoulders and pulled him close. After a few moments they both stood and hand in hand walked down the corridor towards the front of the house and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Harry dear, are you alright?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Yes, Mum. Sorry about that. Just a bit much to take in all at once. It's an amazing house. Almost too amazing," he said.

"Ah, none of that, young fella me lad. This is a beautiful home and you deserve it. You all do," she said seriously.

"Yes, Mum," he replied and then gave her a hug.

"Perhaps we should take a look out back," Mr. Weasley offered. "I don't know how much you took in, Harry, but Mr. Basswood explained some interesting things about the security features of the house."

"Um, I don't think I heard anything about that, Dad. What did he say?" Harry asked sheepishly.

"The house will imprint on you and the family. You'll be able to come and go as you please. Anyone else will have to be invited in. There's something you should find very interesting out back," Mr. Weasley said.

The four adults, with James riding along in his carrier, made their way through the kitchen where a door at the back led to a mud room that

had a rack for hanging wet coats and room for plenty of muddy boots. Harry pulled the door open and saw an interesting, if inexplicable, sight. There was a short covered walkway of flagstone that led to a small stone windowless structure. Harry looked back over his shoulder to his father-in-law with a questioning look on his face.

“It seems that the security folks at Salisbury Plains Construction thought you could use an extra measure of protection. In that small building is a fireplace. Anyone using the floo network to travel here will wind up there and then have to come to this door. No worries about uninvited guests stepping out of your fireplaces here in the house.”

“Wow, that’s really great, Dad. Although I wouldn’t think that would be so much of an issue anymore,” Harry said.

“I don’t know that I would necessarily agree with that, Harry, but better safe than sorry.”

Harry gave a bit of a laugh and then said,

“I wonder what else I missed.”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. Mum and Dad and I were paying attention and there’s a complete description in the papers they left us,” Ginny said.

Harry seemed to have finally shaken off the strange mood that he had been in since first seeing the house. He looked at Ginny and asked,

“So when do they start moving in the furniture and stuff?”

“First thing Monday morning, sweetheart. Everything should be taken care of by the end of the day on Tuesday,” Ginny said.

“Gee, I feel like I should be here to help or something,” Harry said.

“Harry, what would you do? We have professionals handling it all. Mom will be here with me. I think she can handle a bunch of movers, don’t you?” Ginny asked.

Harry looked at his mother-in-law who gave him her best ‘do it my way’ look and then winked at him. Harry smiled, laughed and felt pity for the first mover who dropped something or bumped into a wall. They took one more stroll around the first floor and then made their way to the front door and out onto the front portico. The front lawn looked even better from this vantage point. He looked around and then said to Ginny,

“You know, maybe I shouldn’t have been so fast to accept Professor McGonagall’s offer.”

“Why on earth not, Harry?”

“It’s going to be very hard to leave this every day. I should have just retired to the life of a country squire,” he said with a grin.

“Who are you kidding, Harry Potter?” she said in all seriousness. “You’d last a few weeks at most and then you’d be looking for something to do. You’d be out trying to teach the rabbits about magic.”

“That’s true, I suppose. You know me all too well, Mrs. Potter. Well, what say we head back to the Burrow and get James settled in? Then I believe I owe you dinner, my love,” Harry said.

“That you do, dear man, that you do.”

When they reached the car they took the time to attend to James who made it known on the walk back that he needed both changing and feeding. The ride home was as uneventful as the one out. The illusion that had hidden the entrance to the driveway was one way and allowed a full view of the road before pulling out. The revived Popular got them to the Burrow in fine shape and by mid afternoon Mrs. Weasley had shooed Harry and Ginny on their way. She was in full grandmother mode and was not interested in extra hands interfering with her time with her grandson.

The young couple arrived at Harry's favorite spot near Gringotts and once they got their bearings saw that the street was quiet with only a few handfuls of witches and wizards out and about. As the two made their way along the Alley several passersby offered congratulations on the birth of their son and they took the time to stop in to see both Fred and Angelina. Both wanted to hear details about the house and both received invitations to come out and see it the following weekend. A brief visit to Flourish and Blotts caused a bit of a commotion when Harry revealed the extent of his new library and the need to find sufficient books of interest to fill it. Ginny had to intervene to remind Harry that he should pace himself and make sure that what went into the collection was worthy of the time and expense. It was however a momentous if largely unnoticed event in that it marked the true beginning of what was, in the fullness of time, to be the largest, and best, private collection of magic and magically related texts in the world.

The sun was finally setting by the time Harry and Ginny made it into the Cauldron. As they stepped out into the common room from the rear entrance they heard a familiar voice call out to them.

"Harry! Ginny! Oh it's so good to see you," Hannah called out as she moved to greet them. "I haven't seen you two in ages."

Harry and Ginny both received hugs and when she released them and backed up a step Ginny and Harry looked to one another and then at their friend. Ginny was the first to speak.

"Hannah, are you pregnant?"

"Yes, and thank you for noticing. Early fall," she said with a huge smile.

Additional hugs were offered in congratulations and gladly accepted. Then taking each by the arm she led them to a table. When they sat she did likewise.

“So, what brings you two out this evening? I wouldn’t have thought you’d be getting out this soon after the baby arriving. How is little James?”

“He’s doing very well, Hannah. Pretty much all the normal things, so my mother tells me,” Ginny said. “Not too much in the way of fussing. I’m hoping it stays that way.”

“And what about you, Harry? How does it feel to be a father?” Hannah asked him.

“It’s terrific. It’s such an amazing thing, especially when I hold him. When I have the chance that is,” he said, looking meaningfully at Ginny who replied by sticking her tongue out at him.

Hannah laughed and then said,

“Well, let’s not go there and I’ll take your word for it all. I’ll be finding out soon enough. Now, what would you two like?” she asked, then explained the specials before taking their orders.

When she left to relay their requests to the kitchen, Harry reached over and took Ginny’s hand. He looked into her brown eyes with his green and said in a low voice,

“Thank you, love. You’ve given me more than I would ever have hoped to have when I was growing up at the Dursleys. A wonderful family and a magnificent home.”

“You are more than welcome, sweetheart. You deserve it and so much more. And don’t forget, I had help with the house, and the family, too.”

“Yes, I know. I’ll be sure to thank Abigail when I see her on Monday,” Harry said earnestly.

“Speaking of which, Harry, have you decided how you are going to handle the distance between Hogwarts and the new house?” Ginny asked.

“Well, Disapparating isn’t much of a bother, but it does take some energy and doing it twice a day several times a week is going to get tiresome pretty quick. I’ve already found that out. The builders took care of it nicely on this end with that outdoor fireplace idea. I just need to find a handy one at the other end,” Harry said.

“What about the one in the anteroom behind the Great Hall? You’ve used that before with Abigail,” Ginny asked.

“That was more or less for special occasions, Gin. I don’t want to abuse the privilege or keep the fireplace on the Floo network all the time. It could pose a problem for the school. I have some time to figure it out though. We have the little house in Hogsmeade until the end of summer so I can use that fireplace,” Harry said.

“Hey, that’s it. Why not just keep the house and you can use it for the fireplace. It was pretty cheap to rent. And if you ever find you’re too tired to come home you can kip there. I can leave some clothes and things for you,” Ginny said.

“Hmm, might not be a bad idea. Let me think on it,” Harry said smiling at this wife. “You clever girl, you.”

As always the dinner was excellent and filling. Unbeknownst to Harry the kitchen staff had codenamed his dinner portion as the Potter special. The Cauldron just about broke even on the price of the meal but Harry was a generous tipper so it worked out in the end. After finishing dinner and exchanging a last bit of conversation with Hannah they left and Disapparated back to the Burrow.

It had been an exciting and tiring day for them all, but especially for Harry due to the emotional drain of visiting the house for the first time. He was the first to be off to bed. Ginny sat with her parents and her recently awakened son in the living room.

“Did Harry give you any idea what was going on at your new house?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“Yes, he did, Mum. He was actually quite happy with everything. It just, well, raised a lot of emotions I’d guess you could say. With

James being born and then the new house, he said it finally felt like he had a home and family of his own,” Ginny said.

“I beg your pardon?” Mrs. Weasley said in surprise. “What have we been? Fish and chips?”

“No, Mum. It was difficult for him to explain but I think he feels that up until now what he considers his family and homes have been borrowed in a way. Running in to us on the platform at King’s Cross was a lucky first step, he said, on a journey that brought him to the new house and James and me and Abigail. I think he still feels that the Burrow and the Black house were just borrowed from you and Dad and Sirius. They weren’t really truly his.”

Mrs. Weasley looked very troubled and she stared into the firing place. Without looking away from the dying flames she murmured as if to herself,

“It’s almost as if I’ve failed him somehow then.”

“Oh, Molly. How can you say that? Harry was and to some extent I guess still is a troubled young man. Do you remember what Dr. Parsons said that time? That without us he would have fallen apart completely a long time ago,” Arthur Weasley said.

“I remember, but it doesn’t help much to know that he’s still hurting like that inside, no matter how deep it is,” she replied.

“Mum, I realized something today. I’ve probably known it for a while but it sort of came to the surface talking with Harry at the house. What he has been through in his life has been so different, so unique, none of us can possibly truly understand the impact it’s had on him. And without that understanding we can’t know how he will react to things or how he sees the world around him. All we can do is be there when he needs us and hope we do the right things. So far I think we’ve done pretty well. It’s not like he was upset this time. He was really happy, he just didn’t know how to deal with it at the time,” Ginny said.

Molly shook her head and said,

“Perhaps that’s the greatest tragedy of all.”

The following morning Harry appeared none the worse for the emotional turmoil he had experienced the day before. He was cheerful and smiling as he wreaked havoc on the offerings for breakfast, going through three full helpings. Charlie stopped by to have a chat with Harry about the Department of Mysteries issue. Charlie had nearly convinced himself that he would take on the task but wanted to go over a few issues with Harry. Bill and Fleur stopped over around noon with Victoire, who, once having given and received hugs from her grandparents went straight for Harry and hugging and tickling filled the house with laughter and shrieks.

To Ginny and the elder Weasleys’ surprise Harry insisted on taking the others to the new house by broom and giving them a guided tour. Ginny led the way since she knew best the air route but once there Harry took over and showed them every nook and cranny. Apparently some part of him had indeed been listening the day before. His two ‘brothers’ and ‘big sister’ were suitably impressed and thought it was going to be a great place to raise a family. Bill and Charlie loved the large meadow and instantly realized the implications that that much secluded space would mean in terms of broom flying and Quidditch play.

While Ginny and Fleur did a more detailed exploration of the kitchen, the three ‘boys’ stood outside on the front portico and talked.

“Harry, I had a visit from that guy from QUABBLE to talk about supporting the camp this year. He had some very interesting ideas. He also mentioned your suggestion about expanding the club match idea of Ron’s. That’s brilliant,” Bill said.

Harry shrugged and said,

“I’ve got to think there’d be a lot of folks interested in playing, especially once Hogwarts graduates students that have gotten used to the club matches there. Plus it’s a way to put that farm I’ve got up in Derbyshire to work. It’s a good excuse to tear down all that rubble

left over from that smuggling business. We should take a trip up there one of these days and check the whole place out.”

He got agreement from both brothers on that idea. With the tour over they headed back to the Burrow and a very nice Sunday dinner that included Eleanor who expressed her disappointment at missing the tour but she had a match and couldn't get away.

“Don't worry, El. Everyone can come over on Saturday and see it all furnished and finished off,” Harry said with a grin. “Including a certain cranky wizards' chess set.”

“Cranky?” Eleanor asked.

“Yeah, seems the kings and arms men miss the fair lady Eleanor and want to know where I've been keeping her. The two queens seem to be a bit put off. I think they're getting jealous,” Harry said with a smirk.

Eleanor was actually blushing and Charlie was looking at her with raised eyebrows. Everyone else was laughing. The evening passed pleasantly and since he had to head back to the school in the morning Harry decided he needed to get to sleep. Ginny insisted he use one of the guest rooms since James was still waking up during the night and she knew he had had a taxing time of it the day before.

He was up at dawn, as was Mrs. Weasley, who prepared him a substantial breakfast despite his protests.

“Mum, I can get breakfast at Hogwarts. I'll be there early enough.”

“With all due respect to the kitchen staff, I'd like to think a home cooked meal is a better one,” Mrs. Weasley said with one of her 'serious mother looks'.

Harry had to admit that a Molly Weasley breakfast was tough to beat and he did it justice. By the time he was halfway through his third helping Ginny had come down and was there to see him off. She had a busy day ahead of her overseeing the delivery of the new furnishings. Kreacher and a few of his friends from Hogwarts were going to see to bringing those few items that were going to follow

them to the new house, including Harry's very comfortable chair, their bed and the antique chess set, as well as all of Abigail's art materials.

Harry was going to try the floo network today and test out the idea of using the rented house in Hogsmeade. Since it had no name he settled on the street address. He gave Ginny and James a last hug and kiss and with a handful of floo powder tossed into the Weasley fireplace, he was on his way. After a quick trip he stepped out into the dim, cool little living room of the rented house and he looked around and nodded.

He was out on the street and walking briskly towards the school, the late April morning having just a bit of a bite to it. He made his way up to the castle doors and let himself in. Breakfast was in full swing so Harry chose to make his way to his classroom. As he did he was hailed from the classroom set aside for Firenze.

"Greetings, Harry Potter. All is well with you I trust?"

"Oh, hello there, Firenze. Yes, all is very well, in fact. I can't imagine it being better," Harry said with a smile. "How are things with you?"

"I am well," the Centaur replied solemnly.

Harry had come to learn that this was his friend's only positive statement and was intended to cover anything from being alright to deliriously happy. He smiled in return and continued on to his room. He looked through his notes and tried to get himself into the proper frame of mind for his students. It was proving difficult and he had the feeling that today's classes were going to be light on work and heavy on lightheartedness. 'Ah, well,' he thought to himself with a smile. Somehow he felt the school would survive.

Harry's Future, Part 46

Harry sat in a comfortable chair on the portico of his, or more accurately his family's, new home. It was the Saturday of their first weekend in the house and shortly visitors were due to arrive for the house warming. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were already there, having come early to help with the preparations. The food was, of course, being handled by Mrs. Weasley and Kreacher with promised supplementation from Angelina. Harry did what he could but after a short while it was suggested he just relax and maybe get ready to greet the guests as befits his role as lord of the manor.

He didn't mind very much at all, although he thought the 'lord' comment was a bit over the top. Since the move was completed the previous Tuesday afternoon, Harry had come home each afternoon when his classes were over. He found the view from the portico very enjoyable. He could look out over the lawn and flowerbeds or lift his gaze and see the hills rising away from the meadow further out. The sun was warming the late April morning and Harry let his head rest on the chair back as he closed his eyes and just listened to the various sounds of birds and insects.

He wasn't sure if he had drifted off but the swooshing sound of broomsticks definitely caught his attention. He opened his eyes in time to see Bill and Fleur, each astride a broom land in the front yard. Little Victoire was visible over Bill's shoulder, having made the trip in a back pack style carrier on her dad's back. Her flying outfit included a small hat and pair of goggles. She was waving frantically to her 'unc 'arry'.

Harry smiled as he stood up and walked down the steps to meet them. Hand in hand, Bill and Fleur walked up the path towards Harry. Fleur handed her broom to her husband and then approached Harry with arms wide.

"Good morneeng, mon frere. Oh, 'arry. The 'ouse is très manifique, truly magnificent," she said as she wrapped Harry in a tight embrace before bestowing the traditional two kisses on the cheek, then pulled him close to herself again and whispered in his ear,

"I weesh you many, many, years of 'appiness and love 'ere, mon ami."

Harry gripped her as tightly and replied,

"Thank you, Fleur, for everything. You'll just have to visit frequently to check up on me."

Fleur released Harry enough to lean back and look deeply into his green eyes with her brilliant blue and said,

"Do not theenk that I weell not, chère."

"Harry, it's just beautiful," Bill added. "Ginny and Abigail really outdid themselves."

"Yes, they did. I still have trouble believing it's real," Harry said as he reached up to take Victoire's hand in his.

Fleur stepped behind her husband to undo the straps that kept her daughter in place and then lifted her from the pack. The little girl reached for Harry and he took her from her mother and held her close, getting the miniature version of her mother's hug. Without relinquishing his hold on his niece to led the way up to the front door. The door swung open and Kreacher bowed them in.

"Oh, 'arry. Eet ees even more beautiful on the eenside."

"I know. I've spent the last few nights just wandering around taking it all in. The design, the workmanship. If I called it a dream come true I'd be wrong because I never dreamed of anything like this," Harry said quietly as they made their way towards the kitchen.

For the next several hours variations on this theme played out as more and more people arrived. Hermione and Ron came with Mr. and Mrs. Granger by car. The rest either Disapparated to the front lawn or flew in from the direction of the Burrow. Bill and Fleur had taken the only cross country flight under cover of an invisibility charm that Bill had discovered some years earlier in his work for Gringotts. He called it a fringe benefit.

Harry and Ginny took turns taking groups around for the grand tour. High points included the expansive kitchen, Harry's library complete with the antique chess set and Abigail's bedroom which was more of a suite with a private bath and an additional room for her artwork. George raised an interesting question while Harry was showing he and Angelina around, with little Fred along for the ride.

"So, what kind of basement did they provide for your mad magical experiments, Harry?"

Harry looked at George, mildly perplexed and replied,

"Um, I'm not really sure, George. I think there's some space down there for food storage and laundry but I never even thought to check. I've been too absorbed with everything up here," he finished with a shrug. "Guess I'll have to poke around when I get the chance."

Since arrival times varied for the different groupings of visitors, lunch was a buffet affair arranged on one of the expansive kitchen counter tops. A number of the men folk wound up outside on the front lawn discussing the possibilities of the meadow. After about fifteen minutes, a number of brooms appeared and soon the sky above the calf high grass was full of flyers tossing a brand new quaffle, a house warming present from Charlie and Eleanor, back and forth.

At four o'clock, Mr. Weasley, with the aid of his wand, got the 'boys' to land and come in for dinner. He relayed an order for Mrs. Weasley that they make sure they get cleaned up so Harry pointed out the several washrooms for them to use and he made use of the one in the master bedroom suite. It was still a source of amazement for Harry that he had a 'master suite'. He had come a long way from the 'cupboard under the stairs'.

The all congregated in the dining room. Some very clever thinking had gone into the design of the room and layout of the furniture. Under ordinary circumstances a long table was situated in the center of the room. However, when this arrangement wasn't enough, such as this day, the regular table could be pulled apart into two halves, rotated ninety degrees and two additional leaves taken from a closet

used to connect the original two sections, forming a large 'I' shaped table that could fit the entire group comfortably. Additional chairs were produced by Kreacher from somewhere in the house.

As the 'lord' of the manner Harry sat at one end, or actually, the top of the 'I' looking directly down the long expanse. As he ate his way through the magnificent meal he couldn't help marvel at how in such a relatively short span of time he had progressed from a despised orphan to an integral, and apparently, much loved member of a large family. As he pondered this wonderful turn of events he thought he felt that soft, almost feathery touch on the back of his neck and head. Without Abigail there to confirm it, he had to suppose that the touch was the same as he had felt when he first held James and when he was kneeling in the cemetery at Godric's hollow.

He was brought out of his reverie by a tapping of utensil against glass. Arthur Weasley was trying to attract everyone's attention. When he had it he stood up and cleared his throat before saying,

"As the patriarch of this fine family," he started with a grin, "I just wanted to offer my congratulations to Harry and Ginny. They've come such a long way since that first day on the platform at King's Cross. And a very extraordinary journey it's been. My wish for you two is that the journey continues for many more years, full of joy and over much smoother ground," he said, then raising his glass finishing with, "Cheers."

Everyone around the table raised their glasses and echoed the toast. Mr. Weasley then said,

"Harry, perhaps you'd like to say something."

Harry hesitated a moment and then stood up. He looked around the table, seeing his red headed 'brothers' and his silver haired 'sister'. He laughed to himself thinking that Angelina and Hermione could just as easily be considered in the same way. There was Ted Lupin and Andromeda Tonks. Even Mr. and Mrs. Granger were more family than friends now. He looked back at his dad and mum, without the need for quotation marks, and said,

“Yes, I think I would. First, I want to thank Ginny for being the inspiration for this amazing house and making it a home. I would have liked Abigail to have been here too but she insisted she needed to stay at Hogwarts for the sake of those classmates she’s helping prepare for exams,” he said as his eyes roamed over all of those seated at the table.

“I’ve said this before but I’ll say it again. Regardless of what people may think, I really do consider myself to be a very, very fortunate fellow. No matter how bad things may have gotten for me, ever since that day at King’s Cross, I’ve had someone to help me through it, starting with Ron. And as time went on and things got more and more serious, there were more and more of you to help me. Even after Riddle was finished, and my problems became more internal, you’ve been there for me,” he said, looking down at the table in front of him for a moment, before looking up again.

“I know I’ve been a challenge. My issues with anger, my fears of ending up alone again, my struggles with the concept of family. But no matter how bad it got you’ve always been there to help me through it. Some with unbounded love,” he said looking at Molly Weasley before continuing, “some so fiercely protective to put a mother dragon to shame,” he said as he looked directly at Fleur who smiled back through flowing tears, “and some with a brutal honesty that opened the way for a truer understanding of family and my place in it,” he said looking at Eleanor who was trying hard to maintain her composure.

“And of course, my life, my love, the one who never fails to pull me back from the edge when things start to spin out of control,” he said looking down at Ginny, putting his hand on her shoulder, which she covered with one of her own. “I know I’ve said this before but I don’t think it was ever with such a clear understanding of what I was saying. You are my family. I love you all. This house, this home, is because of you and it’s for you. You are welcome anytime, for any amount of time.”

Whatever else he might have said was cut off by heavy sobbing and the sound of a chair pushing back across the wooden floor. Mrs. Weasley, sitting on the other side of her husband, who sat on Harry’s

left, had stood and was holding her arms out to Harry as she cried. Harry stepped behind his father's chair and met her half way. She caught him up in a fierce hug and cried heavily into his shoulder. Harry held on tightly and then something miraculous happened.

He could feel an additional warmth across his shoulder and through teary eyes he saw to his side the ethereal but still visible image of a slender redhead with bright green eyes. She was smiling as her arms rested on the shoulders of Harry and Molly Weasley. He heard Molly's sharp intake and similar sounds coming from those around the table. The image lingered for a moment and then faded away.

The spectral touch was replaced but a more earthly one as Ginny took the place of the image of Lily Potter and hugged both her husband and mother. After a few moments Mrs. Weasley's crying subsided and she pulled her head back away from Harry's shoulder and looked at him through red rimmed eyes.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but a mother can't help these kinds of things," she said with a little laugh.

"No worries, Mum," was all he could manage in reply.

Draping his arm over both Ginny and Molly's shoulders he turned toward the rest and said,

"I guess the whole family was really here after all."

It was a short while before the shock of seeing Lily Potter's image wore off and the buzz of conversation started up again. Harry had left Ginny and her mother to talk and he wandered over to one of the large windows that gave the dining room a view of the lawn. As had happened before a faint hint of fragrance caught his attention. Without looking away from the window he said,

"Hello, Fleur."

"Arry, you are well, yes?" she asked.

“Oh, I’m far more than well, Fleur. It’s a rare thing for a son to be embraced by both his mothers,” he said, looking over at her with a small smile. “A bit stunned perhaps, but very happy and very content,” he said. “Looks like a full moon tonight,” he added for no particular reason.

“Oui, mon frere. Eet ees a beauteeful sight,” she replied, hooking his arm with hers.

They stood there taking in the beauty of the moonlight bathing the grounds. After a few moments Fleur leaned over to kiss Harry’s cheek and then released his arm and went back to join her husband and daughter. Harry drifted away from the window and for no real reason he slowly made his way out of the dining room and to the front doors. He let himself out and stood on the portico, looking up to the moon which hung no too far above the horizon. It looked unusually bright tonight.

He was standing there for a handful of minutes when the sound of the door opening again caught his attention and he turned to see Mrs. Granger slowly move to stand next to him. She too looked up at the moon and then over at Harry. Her face was a mask of concentration. He looked back at her with his characteristic half smile.

“I suppose this has all been a bit unusual for you, Mrs. Granger.”

“Well, I don’t want to say that I’ve grown accustomed to all this, Harry,” she replied with a smile, “but I’ve gotten used to the idea that unusual is not to be unexpected where you’re concerned.”

Harry laughed an easy laugh and said,

“I can imagine. I still manage to surprise myself every now and again.”

He looked at his best friend’s mother and said,

“Speaking of which, I believe I still owe you a sample of one of the more unusual aspects of my nature.”

“Oh, Harry. Really? Are you sure?” she said eagerly.

“I don’t see any reason why not,” he said and then taking her by the arm, walked with Mrs. Granger to the edge of where the trimmed lawn met the more natural growth of the meadow.

He indicated that she should wait there and he walked further out, leaving footprints in the crushed grass. Turning around he faced Hermione’s mum and with a wave directed his thoughts inward and within two heartbeats was looking down at Mrs. Granger from a much higher perspective. He could see the look of surprise change to awe and almost as quickly one of girlish glee. Her mouth went from an ‘oh’ of amazement to a wide grin and she clapped her hands together and held them to her chin.

Harry dropped down to all fours and dipped his head to bring his eyes more on a level with Mrs. Granger’s head. He was glad to see that she wasn’t frightened in the least. He edged his head forward until his snout was within arms reach.

“Oh, Harry. You’re magnificent. In all my dreaming I never saw anything as wonderful as this,” she said, one hand moving towards him as if it was doing so on it’s own.

As her hand came in contact with the smooth dry skin between his nostrils her eyes went even wider as if the contact confirmed the reality of what her eyes were seeing. Looking past her, Harry could see the other dinner guests hurrying out the door. He had forgotten that Mrs. Tonks and Teddy had never seen him like this. In a few moments the others had formed a loose arc behind Mrs. Granger.

“So, Mum, what do you think of our Harry,” Hermione asked with more than a bit of mischief in her tone.

“Oh, my dear,” she said, sounding a bit like Molly Weasley. “He is truly a wonder. I know you’ve always said he was someone special but this is, is...” she tailed off, unable to articulate what she was thinking.

Mrs. Tonks was staring at Harry, her face an unreadable mask. Ted's eyes were ready to pop out of his head. Ginny came forward to stand at the side of the dragon's head; reaching out to run her hand over the scales below his eyes. She leaned in and said,

"Since you're in a mood to show off, why don't you make it a real show, my love?"

Harry gave her the slow dragon wink which set her off giggling as she stepped back. Harry drew his head up and back and took several steps backward and then turned. With a lunge upward and a strong downward sweep of his wings, he began to climb into the night sky. He could hear the cries of delight from Mrs. Granger and a very loud, 'Oh, cool' from young Ted.

He headed off past the end of the meadow and over the trees that formed the boundary of his property. He wheeled around and came back towards the small crowd and the house, his wings sweeping to gain speed as he flashed over their heads, causing them to duck reflexively, all but Charlie, who stood watching with a huge grin. Harry soared out over the house and pulled up to gain altitude. As he flew back over his family at a higher altitude he let loose a blast of white hot plasma that lit up the meadow like a football stadium for a night match.

He continued to dip, wheel, climb and dive for another fifteen minutes before coming to hover over their heads, the wind from his wings whipping their hair and clothes, then back away to drop down onto the meadow grass again. He walked a few steps forward and brought his head back to the level of his audience. Mrs. Granger stepped forward and placed both her hands on the side of Harry's head and said,

"Thank you, Harry, thank you more than I could ever say."

Mrs. Tonks continued to look at Harry and then she put a hand on Ted's shoulder and looked at him saying,

"Remember this night, young fellow. Remember this display of power and remember what you heard in the dining room. All this power

tempered with all that love and humility. That is the example for you to follow for the rest of your life. Your godfather has much to teach you but that lesson, by example, will be the most important of all," she said, then she looked directly into the dragon's eyes and smiled. "Thank you, dear boy."

Feeling he had done enough for this evening, Harry stepped back and raising himself up he thought of himself and within two heartbeats he was standing in the crushed grass of the meadow. Ted sprinted forward to be caught up by his godfather. Once he was set back down he looked up at Harry and said,

"Oh, wow, Harry. That was unbelievable. My godfather is a dragon," he enthused.

"Yes, Ted, and it has to remain a family secret, understand? This isn't something that can be discussed with anyone from the outside, ever," Harry said, seriously.

"Yes, sir. I understand," the boy said, every bit as seriously.

"Good man. Now what do you say we introduce you to the wizard's chess set?"

"Cool."

They walked back to the rest, Harry with his hand on Ted's shoulder. He got hugs from all the ladies, starting with Mrs. Granger. Eleanor was the last and as she held Harry to herself she whispered in his ear,

"May I consider myself the dragon's sister now, Harry?"

Harry pulled back to look at her eye-to-eye and said with a small smile,

"I thought you already were."

There were handshakes from the guys, although both Charlie and Ron gave him bear hugs. When Ron let him go Harry said,

“Come on, mate. We need to introduce young Ted here to the chess set.”

Ron grinned saying,

“Yes, we do.”

This sentiment was echoed by Eleanor and Audrey. Unexpectedly, Mr. Granger asked if he could tag along. Hermione had never mentioned but apparently her father was a chess aficionado and was intrigued by the concept of magical chessmen. The chess players headed for Harry’s library while the rest made their way with Ginny to the living room for after dinner tea and drinks.

Harry led the way into his library. It was a magnificent room, despite the mostly empty shelving. Harry’s collection of books on magic only managed to fill one such built in case and there were many more ranked around the walls. His comfortable chair from the continent was set to one side near a small fireplace. An elegant desk was set before the large windows. This was for both he and Ginny’s use. In addition, there was the antique chess set flanked by two cushioned chairs for players plus two more for spectators, plus the large leather couch to one side.

Kreacher followed in behind and quickly laid a fire in the hearth and set it alight with the wave of his hand and then he was gone. Harry suggested that Ron and Eleanor take the first round and Ted and Mr. Granger could watch from the other chairs. He and Audrey sat on the couch to watch and talk. The chessmen were quite happy to once more have Ron and the Lady Eleanor in control and knowing they were being watched, they rose to the occasion and put on quite a show.

“Harry, I’m so happy for you and Ginny. This house is just amazing. It’s so grand, yet at the same time it feels so comfortable and homey already,” Audrey said.

“I know what you mean, Aud. I thought that it would take some time to get that feel but it almost seems built in. I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact that Ginny and Abigail put so much feeling into it.

Every time I walked through the front door these past few days coming home from Hogwarts, it's like walking into a warm embrace," he said quietly.

"Do you think it might be because of what we saw before, in the dining room?" she asked tentatively.

"Maybe, I don't know. I guess I'll find out when Abigail comes home. She seems to be able to see them pretty well. I know she said there was no trace of anything when we visited the house I was born in over in Godric's Hollow. But it's not like their regular ghosts like the ones at Hogwarts. I'm not sure what it's all about," he finished.

Audrey looked at her brother-in-law and took hold of one of his hands. She looked at him with a tilt of her head and said,

"How are you holding up, Harry? It's been a pretty emotional time for you lately. What happened in the Ministry building, deciding to resign, then the birth of your son and now the house. Are you doing alright," she asked, her concern so evident.

"It has been a bit of a wild ride. Reminds me of the time I visited my vault right after I got my letter. But for the most part it's been good. Holding James that first time, well, once I got past the fear of dropping him," he said with a laugh. "It was the most amazing thing I've ever done. And to be perfectly honest with you, Audrey, I'm rather glad to be out of the Ministry. Ever since the day the Minister gave me the job of Chief, I've felt uneasy about it. I mean I knew I was doing important work that needed doing but I never felt that I was the right one to be doing it. Being a teacher at Hogwarts feels right. It always has. Even when I was a student, working with the DA always felt right whenever we were together," he said looking down into his lap then back up at Audrey.

"And now all this," he said with a wave of his hand. "I'd have to say I'm really happy."

"I'm really glad to hear you say that, Harry. I think it would be good if you let Mum Weasley know that, too."

“Don’t you think she knows already?” Harry asked.

Audrey shook her head a bit and then smiled at him.

“Harry, never assume that a woman knows how you’re feeling. Would you just assume that Ginny knows you love her? I’d imagine you tell her every now and then don’t you?” she asked with a smile.

“Of course I do. Rather frequently in fact,” Harry said, a touch indignantly.

“The same holds true for your mum, Harry. She worries about you so much; she needs to know that you’re doing ok.”

Harry looked away from Audrey, gazing out of the windows to the night sky beyond. When he spoke again much of the joy had gone out of his voice.

“I wonder sometimes how she stands it. I think the last thing she needed was an eight child with the kind of baggage I brought with me.”

“Oh, no you don’t, Harry. Don’t you even think of something like that. You know full well that she loves you every bit as much as her other children. Yes, you’ve had more than your share of difficulties but you need to know something. Molly Weasley firmly believes that it was fate that brought you into their lives. And that it is her task to care for you and ensure that you’re able to do all the things we need you to do,” Audrey said and then holding of Harry’s hand with one of hers and using the other to pull his head around to face her. “And the most important part of it is, Harry, that she is happy to do it.”

Harry looked at Audrey, then his eyes darted away but she held him firmly by the chin and wouldn’t let him go. His eyes came back to look into hers. Then his lips curled up a bit.

“I’m doing it again, aren’t I?” he said with some chagrin.

“If you mean, looking for the cloud without the silver lining, yes, you are. If you need to, try remembering what it felt like flying earlier, or

better yet, go take a long look at your son. See how long your dark cloud can obscure those rays of sunshine, Mr. Potter,” Audrey said with a smile.

Harry gave her a small smile back and then raised her hand and kissed it. Ginny had once told him that he wasn't losing his mind, he was just scared and confused. He thought he had to be at least a little crazy. He looked over and saw Ted staring transfixed at the pieces on the board. Ron was explaining each move as they were made, with help from Eleanor and Mr. Granger. Harry gave Audrey's hand a squeeze and stood up saying,

“Excuse me for a bit, would you, Aud? I'm going to go see how our other guests are getting along.”

“Sure, Harry. It should be my turn at the board soon,” she said with a knowing smile.

Harry smiled back and then with a last look to the board, seeing Ron's winning position and realizing Audrey was right, he made his way out of the library and down the hall to the living room. When he walked in he could see the rest of his family occupying various chairs and couches happily talking. Ginny sat with James cradled in her arms while Fleur sat nearby with Victoire on her lap. Mrs. Weasley was the first to notice Harry's arrival.

“Harry, dear, how is everything going in the library?” she asked.

“Just fine, Mum. The pros are hard at it and Ted is getting a good introduction to the game. Mr. Granger seems to be enjoying it as well. He seems to really know the game.”

“Yes, he does, Harry,” Mrs. Granger added. “He and Hermione used to play quite a bit but she would never bring a wizard's chess set into the house. She doesn't approve of the violence.”

Harry laughed and looked at his best friend and said,

“Yes, I seem to remember her using the term ‘totally barbaric’ once.”

"I meant it then and I still think it, Harry," Hermione added primly.

"And how are you doing, Harry," Mrs. Weasley asked, eyeing her son.

"I'm doing great, Mum. I'm very happy with how things have been going. I'm really looking forward to this summer. Two months being here all the time. Having Abigail and Ted here, too. And hopefully lots of visitors," he said with a meaningful grin.

Molly Weasley looked fondly at Harry with a big smile. Harry was forced to break eye contact when he heard a very demanding 'Unc 'arry, up' from the vicinity of his knee. He looked down to see that Victoire had slipped off her mother's lap and walked over and was standing next to him, looking up, her face serious and her arms raised. Harry obliged and lifted her up and held her tight and then let her settle into the crook of his left arm, her arms loosely resting on his shoulders.

"And how are you doing this fine evening, young miss," he asked.

"G'd, unc 'arry."

"Can you say 'uncle' now, Victoire? You're getting to be a big girl. Try it. Say it like this. 'unc el'."

"Uncly."

"That's pretty good, but one more time. 'Unc el'. Say it with an 'el' sound at the end."

"Uncle."

"That's right, very good, Victoire. What a smart girl you are," Harry said with a big smile.

"Uncle 'arry," the little girl said with an equally big smile.

"That's my girl."

“Well, Professor Potter,” Bill said. “Once again you demonstrate your natural talents.”

“Thank you, Professor Weasley. If the bottom falls out of the Dark Arts business I can always fall back on elementary education,” Harry said with a laugh. “Maybe I’ll go into partnership with Abigail and start a wizard’s preparatory school. She’s spending a lot of time helping tutor some of her classmates.”

“You can thank yourself for that, Harry,” Bill replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I was talking to her the other day. She said that you were her example. Doing what you can when you can, she called it.”

Harry just smiled but suppressed the shrug. The rest of the evening passed with a great deal of conversation, and Harry drifting back and forth from the living room to the library and back. Ted even got a chance at playing a round of chess. He was given the white side and the king proved to be very patient once it was explained this was the boy’s first time playing. A great deal of advice was shouted up from the board and by the time he was half way through the match with Ron, he was making his commands in a crisp manner. Ron played the game with a simple strategy and gave Ted advice of his own. Harry was glad to see Ted felt comfortable at the board.

During one trip down the corridor he met up with Mrs. Tonks who was returning from a trip to the ladies. She smiled as they met in the corridor. She looked at Harry and said,

“I just wanted to tell you how pleased I am with the way your new home has turned out, Harry. You’ve done so much for so many others it’s nice to see you’ve taking the time to make some happiness for yourself. And I feel privileged to have been able to see what you showed us outside earlier. It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Ted was absolutely besides himself. It’s always amazed him that the famous Harry Potter is his godfather. I don’t know if you knew but it was supposed to be your dad that was going to be the godfather for Remus’ firstborn.”

"No, I didn't know that," Harry said quietly. "I'm glad I was able to carry on in his absence."

"Ted can't wait to be here this summer. I truly hope it's not going to be any problem for you?"

"Andromeda, please. Look at the place. There's more than enough room. He'll be good company for Abigail and I'll be happy to have him around. We need to get to know each other better."

"Just don't let him pester you about the dragon. I can just imagine him asking to go for a ride," she said with a grin.

"To be honest, I wouldn't even know how to go about that," Harry said with a laugh.

As the clock in the corridor began to chime ten o'clock some of the guests began to make their farewells. By eleven they were all gone. James had been put to bed, or crib, and Ginny and Harry were sitting at the counter in the kitchen watching Kreacher put away the last of the dishes. Harry was watching the little elf closely and it seemed he was moving slowly.

"Kreacher? Are you feeling alright? You look really tired," Harry said.

"Kreacher is somewhat tired, Master Harry. There were many things to do today. Kreacher was glad to work but tired now Kreacher is."

"Is a house this size going to be trouble for you, Kreacher?" Harry asked, his voice showing his concern.

Kreacher looked at his master and mistress with an odd expression on his face. He walked over to where they were sitting and with a hop, came to rest on a stool facing them.

"May Kreacher speak with Master Harry and Mistress Ginny?"

"You already are, Kreacher. What do you want to talk about?" Harry asked.

“Kreacher very much likes this new house. It is a happy place to work and does not have the bad memories for Kreacher that the old house has. But it is a large house and Kreacher is not a young house elf anymore. Kreacher wonders if Master Harry and Mistress Ginny would consider help for Kreacher?”

“What kind of help?” Ginny asked.

“Kreacher knows of two Hogwarts house elves that would like to come work for Master Harry and Mistress Ginny. One is a very good cook and the other does housekeeping. When the time comes that Kreacher can no longer work, there would be house elves to work here.”

Harry looked at Ginny, both with somber expressions. It was true that they had no idea how old Kreacher was. He also remembered the hideous display of the heads of former house elves that had been at the Black house. It was obvious that house elves didn't live forever. Ginny gave Harry a nod and he looked back at Kreacher.

“Let me know who they are and I'll talk to them when I go up on Monday. I don't want you taking any long trips when you're tired. And I want you to sleep in tomorrow morning. Ginny and I can take care of breakfast ourselves. You've had a tough day and I want you to get your rest.”

Kreacher looked at his master with his large, liquid eyes. A small smile grew on his lips and he gave a small nod.

“Kreacher thanks Master Harry. Lucky was the day that Kreacher went to work for so kind a Master.”

The little house elf jumped down and slowly made his way to the door that led to his small room. Ginny reached across and gave Harry a squeeze on the arm.

The next morning a special visitor arrived at the house. While Harry sat on the portico sipping from his second cup of tea, having finished breakfast a short while earlier, a large figure emerged from the path

that led from the small gravel car park in the trees. Hagrid had come to meet his godson.

“Mornin’ Harry. ‘tis a fine house ya’ve made fer yerselves,” Hagrid said as he neared the steps.

“Hagrid. It’s great to see you. How’d you get here? I didn’t hear anything,” Harry said perplexed.

“I still have Sirius’ flying motorcycle. Had some work done on it ta quiet it down. Flew down before sun up. If’n ya don’t mind I’ll hang about until sundown fer the trip back.”

“That’ll be great, Hagrid. Can you manage the door? The foyer has head room for you.”

“I’ll fit, Harry. Let’s go meet James.”

With both sides of the double front door open wide and some ducking and side shuffling Hagrid was able to squeeze through and into the foyer. Ginny had heard what was going on and by the time Hagrid was standing to his full height she was there with James. She held him so Hagrid could see. He knelt down and brought his head down for a closer look.

“Cor’ blimey, ya two. He’s a handsome one and no doubtin’ it. Hello, James Potter. I’m yer uncle Rubeus.”

Harry gave a start at the sound of his friend’s true first name and a thought occurred to him.

“Does it bother you that no one uses your first name,” he asked.

“Nah, Harry, not at all. But this young one is diff’rent. Me and him have a long road ta travel together and this way it starts special like. Hope you don’t mind,” Hagrid said.

“Not at all, Hagrid, not at all.”

Harry's Future, Part 47

Harry sat in his usual place at the faculty table overlooking the students who were enjoying the end of term feast. Although his eyes were roaming over the student body he wasn't really concentrating on what he saw. Instead, he was thinking about what a significant year it had been. A new son, a new house and a new career had all come to him during this time. There had also been some dark moments as well. Taking the life of Lucius Malfoy had been the darkest and it opened up a window for Harry through which he saw very clearly that he needed to make a change.

The thought that his power had allowed him to snuff out the life of the former, in action if not in thought, Death Eater like anyone else would a candle had chilled him to his soul. He resolved that he should not, and would not, continue in a position of civil authority. He would instead devote his life to combating the Dark Arts in the classroom, effecting change a student at a time. He didn't dwell on these thoughts for long, however. He need only think about the wife and son who awaited him in their magnificent, yet warm, new home.

He smiled at the thought of the wonderful edifice that Ginny and Abigail had created for them all. In fact, the following morning he would use the fireplace in the little house in Hogsmeade to return home. Abigail would return as usual on the Express, her trunk and art supplies in tow. In order to be connected to the Floo network, Harry had to supply the Floo Network Panel with a name or address for the small fireplace in the back courtyard to be placed on the network. A number of names had been tossed around in the weeks after the house was first occupied.

DragonHall was suggested but Harry thought that sounded too much like a Viking longhouse with images of heavy drinking and roistering, not to mention the connection to his other self. Someone suggested Haven's Rest or RestHaven since Harry found it to be such a peaceful and wonderful place. Again, Harry had an issue because he thought it sounded like a sanitarium. What they settled on was Meadow Crest. It filled several needs. First, it sounded nice. Second, it did provide some form of description, that is the meadow, although no crest was really evident. Lastly, it was sufficiently obscure so that

simple guessing, like Harry's house or the Potters', wouldn't provide access.

Despite all this wool gathering Harry did manage to make a sizable dent in the offerings of the Hogwarts kitchen. It seemed that someone there was indeed looking out for Harry and taking his prodigious appetite into account. When his plate became overburdened with the debris on his meal, such as chicken or chop bones, the plate would fade away and be replaced by a clean one. He was on his third plate but he had only put a few small items of dessert on it as his appetite wound down.

He was sipping from his tea cup when he sensed more than saw Professor McGonagall rise to make her way to the podium to address the student body. The awards announcements went as expected. Ravenclaw once again won the award for scholarship. Hufflepuff won the Quidditch cup on the basis of an outstanding combined performance over the past year of a new keeper and a greatly improved seeker who appears to have benefited from the camps. As a result Ravenclaw was this year's winner of the House cup as well.

When the point totals had become evident in the last few days Bill had to ruefully admit to Harry that Gryffindor had been relying too heavily on its Quidditch play in the past and he needed to start considering rounding out the personality, so to speak, of the house, particularly where academics were concerned. Then the Headmistress said something that immediately got Harry's attention.

"Now, for the final items of business before we bring the evening to a close. It was requested that we provide a bit of time for a special presentation by a special guest. Would you all join me in welcoming that special guest, the Minister of Magic, Mr. Kingsley Shacklebolt."

At the sound of the name and the ensuing applause, Harry looked around and saw his former boss walk through the small doorway that generally served as the faculty entrance to the Great Hall. As he walked towards the steps leading onto the dais he waved to the students to acknowledge their reception. As he approached the podium and the Headmistress he looked over at Harry and gave him a smile.

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall. I truly appreciate your allowing me to be here and taking some time from your end of term celebration," the Minister said as he shook the offered hand of the Head and then he turned to face the students. "First, may I offer my congratulations to all of you for completing another successful year here at Hogwarts. As I hope you are aware, what you learn here is of great importance to our community, now more than it has ever been. We've made great strides in repairing the damage of those ruinous years of Tom Riddle, or Lord Voldemort if you will, but we still have a great deal of work to do to remove the underlying causes that allowed those events to occur. Thanks to the efforts of your instructors we are making progress."

The Minister paused and turned to face the assembled faculty and nodded to them. He then turned back to the students and continued.

"Two of your professors have been especially instrumental in this effort and it is to recognize them that I've come here tonight. I am speaking of course of Professor Bill Weasley and Professor Harry Potter."

At this point the Minister was compelled to stop because the applause that erupted made it impossible to be heard, even with a sonorous spell. As the students stood and applauded and yelled Bill and Harry looked at each other and shrugged. After a few moments the combined efforts of the Minister, Professor McGonagall and the assembled prefects and Head Boy and Girl brought the Hall back to order. The Minister continued saying,

"Professor Weasley was an essential member of the Order of the Phoenix, that small band of brave witches and wizards that were determined to stand against the seemingly inexorable tide of evil that was Riddle and his Death Eaters. He bears the scars of those efforts to this day. After a costly victory, Professor Weasley stepped into the void that was the Chair for Defense Against the Dark Arts and has worked wonders in providing a practical, effective training regimen in this critical area. In addition, he continues to practice what he teaches, which was most ably demonstrated not too very long ago when he

played a critical role in stopping an attempt to topple the leadership of the Ministry and take us back to the old ways.”

Once more the applause broke out and it took a few minutes to get things under control. The Minister went on.

“As to Professor Potter, what can I say that hasn’t already been said, many, many times? From the day he arrived at Hogwarts he has traveled a road unlike any other. You know his story as well as I do, perhaps even better. If I was to try and go down the list we’d be here all night and cause a great deal of discomfort to the Professor, whose greatest attribute is his humility. He too played a pre-eminent role in stopping the coup attempt and added another accomplishment to the list I just mentioned. Therefore, in recognition of their many contributions to our community and in anticipation of many, many more, I would like to take this opportunity to present to Professor Bill Weasley and Professor Harry Potter, the Order of Merlin, First Class. Gentlemen, if you would.”

The room erupted again as Bill and Harry both stood up, bemused smiles on their faces, first shaking each other’s hands and then making their way to meet the Minister at the podium. He removed the awards from within his robes and handed them to first Bill and then Harry. As best he could over the noise he said,

“While not entirely inappropriate since unknown to them, the muggle world has benefited from your efforts, it’s really the only thing I could find that in anyway signifies how deeply we appreciate all your efforts and sacrifices. Thank you.”

They shook the Minister’s hand and with waves to the students returned to their seats. The Minister watched them until they were seated and then turned back to the students and signaled for quiet. Once things settled down he said,

“Lastly, I have been asked by Professor McGonagall to make this last announcement, which as you will come to understand is a very bittersweet one for me. As you are aware, Professor Potter spent this last year here at Hogwarts on sabbatical from his post at the Ministry. For a number of reasons personal and professional, he has decided

that his time at the Ministry has come to a logical end and he has tendered his resignation as Chief of Magical Law Enforcement,” he said to a now stunned student population. “But the Ministry’s loss is Hogwarts gain as Professor Potter has accepted the Headmistress’ offer to remain as a permanent member of the faculty.”

And that was all he managed to get out. The Hall erupted in pandemonium as students clapped and cheered and whistled and hollered and threw their hats in the air. The Minister just smiled and looked back at Harry and gestured for him to stand up. Harry did, with a smile and wave. Others at the table stood and offered congratulations and for a moment Harry disappeared from sight as he was engulfed in a hug from Hagrid.

The noise rolled on and on until finally several members of the faculty, at the request of the Head, fired several exploding starbursts out over the heads of the students, who reluctantly took the hint and slowly brought themselves back to some semblance of order. Professor McGonagall walked back out to the podium and thanked the Minister for his appearance and wished the students a pleasant evening and then dismissed them.

Many of the students milled about, excitedly discussing what had just occurred. Harry and Bill continued to receive congratulations from their colleagues and the Minister came up and offered his thanks once more. Then he said,

“Oh, by the way, I finally got word from Charlie that he’s accepting the offer to dig into the mess at Mysteries. He starts tomorrow. I’d imagine you’ll be hearing quite a bit about it.”

The two just nodded and laughed a bit. The prefects began to herd the students out of the Hall with comments about the need to finish packing for the train tomorrow. As Harry looked out over the dwindling crowd he caught sight of Abigail moving against the tide towards the dais. Harry moved away from the small knot that had gathered by the Minister and walked down the steps to meet his ward.

“Congratulations, Harry,” she said solemnly. “That’s a real honor.”

"I suppose it is, little one, but you know how I feel about those kinds of things."

"Yes I do, but I guess it helps people think that they've found a way to thank you when deep down they know they can never really do it properly, considering what you've done for all of us."

"Oh, I think I know of something someone can do for me that will be more than enough thanks," he said as he held his arms wide in invitation.

Abagail smiled and stepped forward to wrap her arms around Harry as he did likewise to her. They stood there for a few moments oblivious to the noise and looks, an island of calm enveloped in a feeling that can only be describe as family. Eventually, with mutual sighs they stepped apart and Harry looked down into those bottomless dark eyes and said,

"Get a good night's sleep and I'll see you at the platform in the morning, alright?"

"Sure thing, Harry. See you in the morning," she said with a smile and then made her way towards the rear of the Hall.

Harry watched her go and with a final round of farewells he made his way to his small room to get some sleep. The thought of the room, little more than a monk's cell from a medieval monastery, caused Harry to smile. During his first discussion with Professor McGonagall after accepting the full time position the topic of living accommodations was raised.

Up until now, the Headmistress had resisted the idea of moving into the Head's quarters above the office. She suggested that she should probably do so, freeing up the room near the transfiguration classroom that she currently occupied. Harry thanked her for the offer but he intended to commute via the Floo network and would likely only spend a couple of nights a week at the school.

The following morning, once he saw Abagail off at the train platform, he used the fireplace in the small house to travel to his home. In

moments he was walking through the back door and through the mud room to the kitchen where Kreacher was busy at the stove.

“Good morning, Master Harry. Kreacher wonders if he should have gotten the door for Master Harry. Kreacher is not used to back doors.”

“I think we can do without you opening the back door, Kreacher. Has the new help arrived yet?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Master Harry. Dinkle and Nibs arrived at sunrise. Mistress Ginny is showing them the house. Dinkle and Nibs are very pleased to be working here,” Kreacher said with a smile.

“I recall they were very enthusiastic when I spoke to them at Hogwarts. I’m sure they will work out very well. Is there any tea left?” Harry asked.

“Certainly, Master Harry.”

Harry took a cup from the cabinet and poured himself a cuppa. He rummaged in another cabinet and found what he was looking for. A small white box that held the greatest of treasures. Harry opened it and found two slightly damaged pieces of heaven. He put the two sugared buttery biscuits on a napkin and carried everything to the counter. He was half way through the second biscuit when he heard Ginny’s voice coming from the hallway.

“So that’s the house. I hope you’ll enjoy working here. Ah, there’s Harry. Good morning, sweetheart. Welcome home,” she said as she hurried to his side to give him a kiss and a hug.

“Hello, love. It’s good to be home. Good morning, Dinkle, Nibs. So what do you think?” Harry asked with a smile.

“It is a grand and glorious house and it will be an honor to work for the great Harry Potter,” the taller house elf, Dinkle said and then caught a look from Kreacher. “Master Harry.”

“That’s ok, Dinkle, you’ll get used to it after a while. Gin, what time am I supposed to be at the Burrow to go with Dad to get Abigail?”

"He said you should get there around three. With the unmagicked Popular it should take a bit to get to Kings Cross," she replied.

Out of nowhere came the faint sound of a baby fussing. Ginny said,

"Be right back, I think someone is waking up."

Harry smiled as he watched her hurry off. He then looked down at the two former Hogwarts house elves and said,

"Well, fellas. Welcome to our home. I'll leave you to Kreacher."

Harry took his tea and went to his library. He placed his cup down on the small table beside his favorite chair and went over to the bookcase and pulled out a large leather bound tome and took it back to his chair. He settled in with a long contented sigh and began to read.

As the clock on the mantle approached noon, supported by a growl from Harry's stomach, a small head appeared around the edge of doorframe. It was Nibs.

"Master Harry, Kreacher wishes to inform Master Harry that lunch is ready in the kitchen."

"Thank you, Nibs. I will be right there."

The head disappeared and Harry smiled as he placed the book on the side table and he made his way to the kitchen. When he arrived he found Ginny sitting at the counter with James in his carrier.

"Hello there, you two. You know, I think I'm going to enjoy this summer."

"I would certainly hope so. Two whole months to knock around your new surroundings, reading, chess and flying with Ted and Abigail, what's not to love," Ginny replied with a smile.

Harry smiled back as he dove into his lunch. As the new cook's helper, Nibs paid particular attention to what Harry was eating. The more Harry ate the wider the little elf's smile grew. When Harry was finished Nibs levitated the dishes off the counter towards the sink. As he passed Kreacher, who was cleaning the stove, he whispered but in still audible tones,

"The Master will be a joy to cook for."

Harry had to work hard to stifle his laugh as Ginny hid a smile behind her hand. After his lunch Harry took some time to hold James and walk around the lower floor of the house with him. Ginny had gone upstairs with Dinkle to make sure that Abigail's rooms were ready. Dinkle had spent some years as a housekeeper at Hogwarts, making the rounds by night, cleaning, tending fires and transporting clothes to and from the laundry.

He and Ginny discussed how things would run. Dinkle assured Ginny that he could move silently through the house doing chores at night as he always had. She decided to give it a try and see how it worked out. She never gave it a thought while up at Hogwarts but she wasn't sure she was comfortable with the idea of the elf roaming the house while everyone else was asleep.

Around quarter to three, Harry prepared to leave for the Burrow. He gave Ginny and James kisses good bye and Disapparated from the front portico to the back yard of the Burrow. Meadow Crest had been treated to a full complement of security spells and Disapparating in or out of the house wasn't possible. He went through the back door and called out,

"Hello, the house."

"Harry, dear. So wonderful to see you. How was the year end at Hogwarts?" Mrs. Weasley asked as she came to greet him.

"It was great, Mum. The Minister came up and announced my leaving the Ministry and going full time at the school," he said as he hugged her.

“And?” she prodded.

“Oh, and Bill and I each were awarded OMs, first class,” he said as an add-on.

“Harry,” his mum chided. “The highest award in the wizarding community and you shrug it off. We are so proud of you,” she said as she squeezed him again.

“Thanks, Mum,” was all he said in reply.

“Well done, you, Harry,” Mr. Weasley added as he strode into the kitchen. “Bill sent us an owl last night. He didn’t make much of it either but it is a great honor. Now, what say we go collect young Miss Abigail. Molly, you’ll meet us at the Meadows?”

“Of course, I will. Wouldn’t miss it for the world. You just be careful and no funny business, my lads,” she said with a stern look.

Both returned looks that said ‘who? us?’ and then Mr. Weasley clapped Harry on the shoulder and they left through the back door. Mr. Weasley reached into his jacket and pulled out the hat and gloves that Bill and Charlie had given him for Christmas and put them on. The image he gave of an English country gentleman would have looked right at home behind the wheel of a Triumph or MG roadster or even a Jaguar E-type.

As it was, with the little black Popular headed down the dirt road toward Ottery St. Catchpole, he couldn’t have been happier no matter what he might have been driving. As before, Harry marveled at how smoothly the little car was running. His view from the front passenger seat was still a thrill since it had been such a rarity for him. He half wondered if he should look into learning to drive himself.

The real surprise came once they merged onto the motorway heading for London. Since it was a Saturday afternoon the traffic wasn’t too bad but the little car seemed to be more than holding its own with the other, more modern conveyances. Harry began to suspect all was not as it seemed. He gave his dad a sidelong glance and couldn’t help but notice the barely concealed glee.

"Hmm, I must say, Dad, for such a small, older car it seems to be stepping right along. I wouldn't have thought that that little engine could keep up with all the other cars."

"It's amazing what a motor can do when it's fresh and in a good state of tune, Harry. The key to keeping muggle machinery running well is good maintenance," Mr. Weasley offered.

"I would have to agree with you there, Dad, considering the evidence. I'd imagine good quality petrol plays a big part, too," Harry added, still watching the happy driver from the corner of his eye.

"Yes, indeed, son, yes, indeed."

"I'd imagine a little assistance wouldn't hurt, either," Harry offered.

"Whatever do you mean, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked innocently.

"Come on, Dad. I was a copper, remember? Spill it," Harry said.

"Harry, what a tone to take," Mr. Weasley said indignantly.

"Dad," Harry said, drawing out the word in his best interrogative tone.

"Oh, alright, but you must promise to keep this between us. I've been keeping your secrets, so turnabout is fair play."

"You have my word," Harry replied solemnly.

"Well, when I was working on the motor and had it all torn apart it was evident that it was pretty tired. I took the major parts to a muggle machine shop to see what could be done. Well, I got to talking to the machinist and he mentioned how horribly underpowered the Populares were when brand new, and once some wear set in they were even weaker. He said he always thought that the six cylinder motor from a Volvo, like your Uncle Vernon's, would make a nice upgrade."

“I’m no expert, Dad, in fact I know next to nothing about cars and engines and stuff but I seem to remember the bonnet of Uncle Vernon’s car was a bit wider than this one?” Harry said.

“Well, remember, Harry, the Popular has separate wings for the front wheels, so the bonnet can be quite a bit narrower. But you’re right. It did take some work to make it all fit,” Arthur Weasley said with a smile.

“Hmm, the enlargement spell was a bit more extensive than we were led to believe then?”

“You could say that, son, you could say that.”

Any further conversation was curtailed as Mr. Weasley swung out to overtake a lorry that was chugging along in front of them. It appeared that Mr. Weasley’s promise not to build another flying car was only true in the sense that it didn’t leave the ground. As they approached London and the traffic began to build, it was evident that something else had been done to the little car. Like it’s larger, Ministry cousins the Popular displayed the uncanny knack for fitting into tight spaces no car, even as diminutive as this one, should have fit through. Mr. Weasley looked over at Harry after one such maneuver with a shy smile and said,

“It pays to have friends in the Ministry Transportation Department.”

Harry could only hang his head and laugh. They pulled up to the station and left the car alongside the curb. The same magic that caused muggles to ignore its unusual traffic behavior allowed it to sit unmolested by both civilians and law enforcement. With plenty of time to spare Harry treated his dad to some fish and chips from a nearby vendor. Harry had taken to always having several fivers in his pocket when he ventured into what he thought of as muggledom. They finally found themselves standing on platform nine and three quarters along with many other parents, many of whom came up to talk with Harry and Arthur.

Apparently, news of his move to full professorship had gotten out and he received many congratulations and well wishes. A couple of his

former Aurors who were there to collect children had come up and struck up conversations. Invariably they called him 'Chief'. Within the circle of British magical law enforcement, this title would follow him for the rest of his life. After a time the sound of the chuffing locomotive could be heard and everyone expectantly looked in the direction of the tracks and watched as the maroon and black engine slowed and stopped. In moments, the streams of black robed students began to pour onto the platform. Harry was the subject of many shouted greetings and waves and 'see you in fall' well wishes as the students hurried past.

Harry caught sight of Abigail as she exited the car and he was glad this time there were no crutches or canes to get in the way of a full welcome home hug. After giving Harry his, Abigail hugged Mr. Weasley next, who smiled down at her as he said,

"We have a bit of a surprise for you, young lady."

"Really?" she replied breathlessly. "What is it?"

"Oh, no. You'll just have to wait until we get outside. Let's gather up your gear and be on our way."

With trolley in hand they worked their way to the baggage car and collected Abigail's trunk and art supplies, as well as her caged owl. With a number of waves they got through the divider wall and then out through the main doors. When they turned in the direction of the Popular, Abigail's eyes went wide and she squealed,

"Oh, cool. What a great ride home this is going to be."

They wrestled her things into the magically spacious boot, then piled into the passenger compartment. Abigail kept hold of her owl in the roomy rear seat as Mr. Weasley navigated smoothly back into traffic. Abigail was having the time of her life, it seemed. Apparently she was well aware of what her partner in crime had been up to and she commented on how well the little car performed with the updated engine and asked what he had done to get such a nice, smooth ride.

Harry heard something said about dampers and springs but he wasn't too sure what that was all about. He decided it was time to borrow the book he had bought for Abigail that first weekend she had come to visit the Burrow. The ride home was swift and uneventful. Despite appearances to the contrary, Arthur Weasley was a conscientious driver, perhaps taking into account the 'valuables' onboard.

It was well after dark when they pulled through the magic screen to the drive and came to a halt in the gravel car park. They hauled out Abigail's gear, strapped everything onto the trunk and then Harry levitated it for the trip to the house. As they came out of the wood, the house in all its blazing glory came into view. Harry could hear Abigail's gasp. It was the first time she truly saw the completed building. All the light pouring from every window added to the spectacle.

"Oh, Harry. It's more beautiful than I thought it could be," she said, barely above a whisper.

"We have you to thank for that, you and Ginny. That's your vision right there."

Someone inside must have been watching or 'watching' because they were barely half way to the portico when the door swung open and several people hurried out to meet them. Ginny, carrying James, Mrs. Weasley, and Fleur came down the steps and Abigail was quickly engulfed in hugs. Bill Weasley followed at a slower pace, holding on to his daughter's hand. Victoire only had eyes for her uncle 'arry and he hurried up to meet her.

"Hello, how's my girl today?" he said as he swept her up.

"G'd, uncle 'arry," she said as she squeezed his neck.

"So, Professor Potter, now that you're all home together, what plans for the summer?" Bill asked.

"Well, Professor Weasley, I plan to do a lot of reading, helping Abigail and Ted with their flying, get ready for camp this year as I

plan to be there the full two weeks. I also imagine Charlie may be asking for some of my, our, time.”

Bill nodded and replied,

“He’s already got me on hold in case he comes across anymore spelled doors. But since he and El are inside I’ll let him do his own asking.”

With the welcome hugs finished the small group headed inside led by Harry, still carrying his niece. In the living room he saw Charlie, El and Mrs. Weasley chatting. He set Victoire down and moved to say his hellos as the rest followed in behind them. In moments they were all sitting around the spacious room. Dinkle had taken charge of Abigail’s trunk and was floating it up to her rooms. It wasn’t long before Charlie, Abigail and Ginny were comparing notes on where each stood with their inputs to the book on magical creatures. Harry was talking to Eleanor and Bill while the elder Weasley’s were talking to Fleur.

“Oui, Dad. My aunt and uncle would be more than ‘appy to let you use their ‘ouse again thees year. They deedn’t weesh to charge you rent, but they understand ‘ow you feel about eet. The amount weell be small, ‘oweever,” Fleur said.

“I don’t mind a bargain, my dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, “but for nothing would make me feel like we were taking advantage. I just absolutely fell in love with the view of the sea from that balcony.”

“I know, Muum. The way the sun would sparkle on the water een the early morneeng or eveneeng. I remember from when I was a leetle girl.”

Meanwhile, the subject had turned to Quidditch with Bill, Harry and Eleanor.

“So, El. How’s the season been going? I’m sorry to say with everything going on I haven’t been paying attention,” Harry said.

"It's been so-so, Harry. We're better than breaking even, but only just. We need something to give us a boost for the rest of the season. I understand we picked up a promising chaser who just graduated and I hope that helps," she said.

"I wish we had done better this year," Bill said morosely. "Harry, I realize that you aren't officially associated with Gryffindor but do you think there's anything you could do? It just hasn't been the same since your seventh year. We held up pretty well the first two years you were gone, but we pretty much graduated all the talent that you and Kreacher trained after that and it's been a tough run."

"Well, I suppose having been a Gryffindor I can throw some support their way. I wonder about something though. Kreacher, could I see you a moment please," he called out.

The little house elf hurried into the room and came to stand before Harry. He had taken to wearing tan trousers, a white shirt and tan vest since moving to the new house. He waited expectantly while Harry looked at him.

"Kreacher, I was wondering. When I was in my last year at Hogwarts, did you enjoy helping with the Quidditch team?"

"Oh, yes, Master Harry. Kreacher very much enjoyed helping to coach the team. Kreacher keeps the sweatshirt and whistle clean and ready."

"So, you'd like being able to help coach again then?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes, Master Harry."

"What do you think, Bill? Would your team captain be interested in having some coaching assistance?" Harry asked.

"If he wants to be captain he will," Bill said seriously. "As you can imagine, Professor McGonagall wasn't any too happy with what happened this past year. She said and I quote, 'I do not intend to see a return to the days when Gryffindor couldn't win a cup'. Any help would really be appreciated, Harry."

"Well, it will depend on how well Kreacher is feeling at the start of term. Hopefully, with Dinkle and Nibs here he'll have the chance to rest up. Ok, thanks, Kreacher. We'll talk about it more over the summer," Harry said.

"Yes, Master Harry," Kreacher said, his step decidedly lighter as he left.

"Thanks, Harry. That should be a big help. We'll corral the Gryffindor flyers at the camp and do some prep work."

It was at this time that Ginny announced they were going to take Abigail up to her rooms, a journey that involved all the ladies, leaving Bill, Charlie, Harry and their dad to their own devices. The conversation quickly turned to the Charlie's new project.

"So, Charlie, you had your first look at the Mysteries Department. Anything you can tell us?" his dad asked.

"Well, to say it's a mess would be an understatement. It's not just the damage that occurred when you two rescued the Minister. It looks like much of it's been neglected for years now. Maybe it's because of the work they were doing in the Hebrides but I don't know. It looks like more had to be going on to divert all that attention away from what we thought they'd be working on," Charlie said then he looked directly to Harry. "I had your lead investigator along for the walk-through today. I know you hate it when we say these things but he really thinks the world of you. He's really torn about you resigning."

Harry just looked at his bother and didn't say anything. Bill wasn't so reluctant.

"What do you mean, Charlie?"

"He was glad that Harry was safely out of the line of fire, but he really respects him and was very grateful for the opportunity to become a true investigator. Apparently, the former Director, who was Auror chief before that, put a lot of emphasis on Aurors being tough, street fighter types. He didn't put much faith in the brainy approach to

fighting the Dark Arts. Milligan was something of square peg in a round hole. He had the credentials but he also had the brains.”

Harry was gazing at the floor but then looked up at Charlie and said,

“I’m surprised he actually said all that.”

“Well, it did take him about five hours to say it all. It came out in bits and pieces as we were poking and prodding as he put it. He said he’d be willing to help look at anything we come up with to see if it has ties to any current investigations and he’s going to assign an Anthony Goldstein to help me. Apparently he’s one of your DA turned patrollers who has aspirations to become an Auror investigator.”

“Yeah, Evelyn Muntab had her eye on him to move up to the Tactical Squad but he expressed a desire to go into investigations. He’s out of Ravenclaw, was one of their Prefects. Smart and capable. He’ll be a big help, I’m sure,” Harry said.

“That’s good to know,” Charlie said. “I’m looking to have a couple of my friends come in and help. One is a fair hand in the field, but he’s really good at digging into musty old archives and libraries and such and coming up with valuable knowledge that’s been lost and forgotten. He should be handy going through the mess they made of the files. Should make for a very interesting summer, and then some.”

Once again a small head made itself visible from the side of the entrance to the living room. Nibs said,

“Master Harry, food is ready for you in the kitchen.”

“Thanks, Nibs, we’ll be right there,” Harry replied as the head bobbed then disappeared.

The four rose and followed the little elf into the kitchen where one of the counters was covered with a variety of food that was laid out on platters and in bowls. Ginny had decided a buffet would be more practical considering the informal nature of the gathering. Harry grabbed a plate and began to fill it under the watchful eye of Nibs.

Apparently this was a cook who derived great joy from seeing his handiwork appreciated so.

The men had arranged themselves at the counter used for breakfast when the ladies returned. Harry looked up and saw the huge grin on Abigail's face. He smiled in return.

"So, little one, what do you think? Did it turn out how you hoped?"

"Oh, it's so much better, Harry. To stand in the middle of it all, compared to looking at a flat piece of paper, is favorite," she said, her eyes shiny as she walked up to stand at his side. "Thank you for giving me a home."

Harry looked at his ward, his daughter and said,

"Thank you for helping make it a home."

Harry's Future, Part 48

Harry sat on a rickety looking, but supposedly sound, chaise lounge on the lawn near the edge of the meadow that gave his small estate its name. He had James cradled in his arms and he split his attention between his nearly three month old son and his godson Ted Lupin who was getting his first lessons in broomstick flying. Ginny was standing in the higher grass of the meadow while Ted sat hovering about three feet off the ground, his hands white knuckled as he gripped the handle of Abigail's custom made broom. The broom's owner was sitting in the grass next to Harry watching intently.

"He's looking a little skittish, don't you think, little one?" Harry asked.

"He looks positively petrified, Harry. Didn't his gran ever let him near one?" Abigail asked.

"Apparently not. When I mentioned yesterday when she dropped him off that we'd be starting lessons today she said we'd be starting from scratch. Apparently Andromeda never really used one. But I'm sure Ginny will get him to relax."

Ginny had finished explaining what she wanted Ted to do. To help him get over his anxiety, she held on to his upper arm to steady him as he drifted slowly for several yards, then turned and went back the other way. He made several circuits this way and then Ginny let go and instructed him to take a few laps himself.

Ted was a little shaky on the turns but after several more passes he started to get the hang of it and his face began to show signs of a small smile. Ginny offered him encouragement and told him to take longer runs before turning. After a half hour or so he was showing more confidence and Ginny called for a break. Ted came to a halt at the edge of the lawn and slowly, if a bit wobbly, settled until his feet touched the grass.

Abigail was on her feet by then and she hurried up to offer her congratulations and then she took hold of her broom and climbed aboard. In moments she was zipping back and forth over the meadow,

her thin voice barely audible as she verbalized her happiness. Harry looked over at Ginny who had come to kneel down next to the chair.

“She sure has come a long way, hasn’t she?” Harry asked.

“Yes, she has, Harry. Ted, you’ll be flying like that all too soon. Just remember it takes a little bit of time to get comfortable with how to move and adjust your body to keep yourself on the broom,” Ginny said, then with an impish grin added, “Unless, of course, you’re born to it like Mr. Wonderful, here.”

“Hey, be nice,” Harry retorted, then looked down at his son. “Your mother is always picking on me, James. Hopefully, when you’re older you’ll be able to help defend me.”

“Well, I like that. Trying to turn our son against me. Times up, give him here,” Ginny said seriously, holding out her hands.

Harry reluctantly relinquished James and turned his attention to Abigail who was currently skimming across the field about waist high. After a few more minutes she came to a landing and waved Ted over, who resumed his seat, more confidently this time, and he began to move about over the grass, making wide sweeping turns. By the time they needed to wrap things up for lunch the young wizard-to-be was able to make smooth transitions from straight away to turn and back again, and make short higher speed dashes.

Sitting around the breakfast counter in the spacious kitchen of Meadow Crest, Harry, Ginny, Abigail, and Ted were finishing up their lunch. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that the rest were watching Harry finish his as they were already done. As Harry scraped up the last mouthfuls he looked over at Ted and said,

“So, young fella, how did you enjoy your first try at flying?”

“Um, good, Harry. I guess I was kind of nervous at first. It felt like it wanted to roll out from under me, that’s why I was holding on so tight. It got better as I started to relax a bit, though. At the end I was really enjoying it,” he said with a grin.

"That's the tricky part about it," Ginny began. "The more tense you are the more the broom seems to want to roll you off. You want to hold on just tight enough to guide it, not try and strangle it," she added with a grin.

"Now, that's why you're a better flying teacher than I am, Gin. I never experienced that when I learned. I was so mad at Draco Malfoy that I just hopped on and I guess nature just took its course. But that will be all the flying for today, Ted. You have to pace yourself or you're going to wind up really sore in all kinds of places. What do you say to some wizards chess this afternoon?" Harry asked.

"Sure, Harry, that would be great. Your chess pieces are really cool," Ted replied.

"What about you, little one?" Harry asked.

"I have work to do, Harry. I've sketched up all the animals for the book. Now I need to start work on finished drawings. Most will be in pen and ink, but we've decided that we want to do some tinting and some of the more spectacular ones will be done in full color," she replied airily.

"Hmm, it seems I need to get into Flourish and Blotts this week then and ask about a publisher. Maybe we can all take the trip and do lunch at the Cauldron. Maybe Wednesday?" he said with a questioning look.

"I think that would be lovely, Harry," Ginny said. "But I think I'll ask Mum to come out and baby sit. I don't want James going through the floo network just yet."

"Your call, my love," Harry said, then looking at Ted, he added, "Ok, Master Ted, let's be off to the library and do combat."

"Yes, sir, m'lord Harry," Ted replied in a pretty good imitation of the black king.

Harry laughed and with a tussle of the boy's hair they were off. Abigail smiled as she watched them head off and then she too went off to her rooms and her work. Perhaps an hour later and two games into their play, Ted and Harry were interrupted by Kreacher standing in the doorway.

"Master Harry, Masters Maxwell and Milligan request to speak with Master Harry."

Harry looked surprised but he couldn't sense any tension so he assumed there was no emergency.

"Um, sure, Kreacher. Show them in, please."

Kreacher bowed, stepped aside and with a gesture directed the two Aurors into the library. Harry stood up and met them with an extended hand. After shaking hands, Harry indicated Ted and said,

"This is my godson, Ted Lupin, son of Remus Lupin and Nymphodora Tonks. Ted, this is Chief Maxwell and Deputy Chief Milligan of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Hello, sirs," Ted said a bit timidly.

"Hello, Ted," Maxwell said, "we both knew your mother well. She was a very fine Auror. We miss her."

"Thank you," was all Ted said.

Milligan simply held out his hand and shook Ted's, with Maxwell following suit. Harry indicated the extra chairs and said,

"Please, have a seat. Nothing wrong, I hope," Harry said.

"No, sir," Maxwell said.

If Harry felt the honorific was out of place he made no show of it.

"On the one hand we were curious to see how the gentry lived," Maxwell said with a grin. "Plus we wanted to get your input on some

applications that we received. They're from recently graduated students and they all listed you as a reference so we thought we'd come out and discuss them with you."

"Sure, I wouldn't mind at all. As to gentry, I think you might have to look around some more to find some. I'm just a lowly professor," Harry said with a grin.

Both men had expressions that clearly indicated that they weren't buying what Harry was selling. Maxwell withdrew a sheaf of parchment from his robes and handed it across to Harry. While Ted sat quietly nearby, straining slightly to get a peek at the pages, Harry thumbed through the applications to see the names. The two Aurors watched as their former boss went through the papers, or parchments, his head nodding.

"They were all good, actually excellent students. I'd say any or all of them would make fine Patrollers. I see two that would most likely make strong candidates eventually for moving up to the Aurors. I'm referring to Andiron and Snipes. How many slots are you looking to fill?" Harry asked in finishing.

"If you think they're all good we'll offer them all positions. With the loss of Whitby and Anderson deciding to retire, plus a couple more of the older Aurors making noises about retiring before the end of the year, we need to move some of Muntab's Mob up sooner than later and that will leave Patroller slots to fill, plus we think we need some additional staff to add to those rotating to Azkaban," Maxwell said.

Harry nodded then his eyebrows pulled down and he said,

"Muntab's Mob?"

"Oh, that's what some of the old timers have started calling your DA alums who have been training to move up. The youngsters consider it a badge of honor of sorts. The Patrollers have been trying to come up with a name for themselves as a result."

"What's wrong with Patrollers?" Harry asked.

“Nothing really, Chief,” Milligan interjected with his usual wry grin. “Most of the Patrollers figure that they’ll stay Patrollers. They’ll advance some, but most know they won’t make it to Aurors. They’re fine with it but they’re looking to add some, oh, mystique to it, I guess.”

Harry’s face looked serious and somewhat concerned as he said,

“I’m not sure I like the idea of them getting so clannish, if you know what I mean.”

“I wouldn’t let it concern you, Chief,” Milligan replied. “They’re just looking for some sense of identity within the department. Besides, I let it get around that if they let things get too out of hand, you wouldn’t like it and you’d have something to say about it. I also happened to mention that you had plenty of contacts in the Ministry still and you’d wind up finding out sooner than later and you weren’t all that far away.”

Harry snorted and with some irritation responded,

“Well, isn’t that just grand. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate being used as a club. Again.”

“Again?” Maxwell asked.

Harry went on to explain the incident involving Ginny and the two Slytherin Beaters. By the time he was finished Milligan was chuckling and Maxwell was failing at trying to hide a smile.

“Sorry, Chief,” Milligan said with a final laugh.

“I understand you spent some time with my brother-in-law, Charlie, the other day.”

“Yes,” the Deputy Chief replied, all business again. “That place gives me the creeps.”

"I know what you mean. I've been in there twice and neither time ended well. He told me you were going to assign Anthony Goldstein to help out," Harry said.

"That's right. Goldstein is a sharp one and knows how to ask good questions. This will be good training for him, too."

After another quarter hour of discussion, Maxwell said,

"Well, sir, we don't want to intrude on your summer any further. We appreciate you taking the time to talk to us."

"It's no problem at all. I'm glad to be of help. Please give my regards to everyone and let them know that they are welcome to visit. Here or at Hogwarts," Harry said as he rose.

The two Aurors also stood up and they shook hands. Milligan looked down at Ted and gave him a wink and Harry walked them to the front door. When he returned he saw Ted looking at him.

"You're looking awfully thoughtful, young fella," Harry said.

"You quit the Aurors, didn't you, Harry?"

"I resigned, yes. Why?"

"Did you notice that they called you sir and Chief still? How come?"

Harry just shrugged and said,

"Habit, probably."

Ted looked at him with squinty eyes but said nothing more. They went back to their interrupted game. The magical chessmen seemed to be pretty perceptive despite their belligerence and with young Ted at the board they tended to behave themselves and showed more patience at the basic level of play. Harry smiled when he thought of how badly they treated Bill and Charlie when they played.

These activities set the pattern for the first few weeks of the summer for Harry and his family. Ted would get his flying lessons in the morning and he'd play wizards chess with Harry in the afternoon. Occasionally he would play a game of some kind with Abigail or go exploring on the grounds, in the woods on the edge and along the banks of the stream and pond.

They took their trip to Diagon Alley that first week and Harry's friends at Flourish and Blotts suggested that Ginny and her collaborators talk to the folks at Willikins and Burbarry's, the principle and oldest publishers of Britain's magical community. While no one could prove it, it was suggested they had a hand in producing the famous Book of Kells.

Harry was enjoying himself immensely. It wasn't one of the benefits of teaching that he had in mind but the long summer break was quickly growing on him and he couldn't remember feeling so at ease in his life. His evenings were spent in the library reading and doing some writing of notes for how he might go about infusing his Applied Magic material into the study plans of the other courses per Professor McGonagall's direction.

A disturbance in this idyllic country lifestyle arrived midway through the third week of July in the persons of Bill and Charlie Weasley arriving on his doorstep. When Kreacher announced the brothers Harry figured they were there to talk about the upcoming camp session. He was wrong. As he sat down with his two brothers-in-law in his library he asked,

"So what's going on?"

"Harry, I think I could use your help with something at the Mysteries Department," Charlie said.

"What's the problem?"

"We found a door and we can't find a way to get it open. Bill has looked at it and he hasn't found anything in the way of curses or whatever but we can't figure it out. We thought you might be able to make some headway with it," Charlie replied.

“And if all else fails, make the door disappear?” Harry asked with wry grin.

“Um, no, not really. Since we don’t know what’s on the other side we’d rather not try anything that drastic. We just thought you might be able to sense something, maybe or find some key to it, as it were.”

“Ok. I figured I’d have to take part in it somehow, this doesn’t sound so bad. When do you want to do it?”

“Would now be too much trouble?” Charlie replied.

“Sure. Just let me tell Ginny I’m leaving.”

The three got up and left the library and made their way to the master suite where Ginny was spending some time with James. He was still sleeping in the suite. Ginny wasn’t ready yet to move him to the small nursery down the hall. They found her playing with James on the bed, dangling little toys for him to look at and reach for. She looked up as Harry entered and her brothers hung back.

“Hello there, you two. What’s the matter, don’t you want to say hello to your nephew?” she asked.

“Um, we didn’t want to just barge into your bedroom, sis,” Bill replied.

“Don’t be absurd. Come in and say hello and then tell me what you three are up to. You have that look that something is up.”

Bill and Charlie came in and stood next to the bed and looked down at their nephew who had abandoned his game and was regarding his uncles seriously. They each offered fingers that he grabbed and squeezed.

“Ok, so, what’s going on and how does Harry fit in?” she asked.

“We found a strange door down in Mysteries. Bill and I can’t make any headway with it, so we thought maybe Harry’s unique capabilities might be able to get to the bottom of it,” Charlie replied.

"I don't suppose my saying 'be careful' will mean anything," she said sardonically.

"Of course it will, love. I'm always careful," Harry said with a straight face.

Ginny snorted and then stood up, kissed him briefly and said,

"Off you go, but no heroics or anything crazy, alright?"

"Yes, ma'am," they all said in chorus.

The three wizards left the room and then the house, Disapparating to the Atrium of the Ministry. Without any fanfare they made their way to the elevators and down to the ninth level. Harry noticed that the door into the circular room of doors was wedged open and a wizard guarded the open way. He nodded at the three as they went inside. Charlie led the way into the Brain room which was now empty since the tank containing the few floating brains was damaged in the rescue of the Minister.

They moved through the room and came to a door that Harry hadn't paid much attention to before. Charlie pushed it open and it revealed a long tunnel with somewhat rough walls that appeared to be cut through the London clay and then lined with some type of plaster or mortar. The tunnel began a shallow downward slope and after the first hundred feet they pulled out their wands and used the 'lumos' charm to light their way. They trekked for several hundred yards and then came out into a largish space perhaps fifty feet across and maybe ten feet high. The walls were lined with brick. Several doors were arrayed around the room. Charlie turned to Harry and said,

"We found this shortly after we began poking around. These two doors just open onto what look like storerooms. This one here is the one we can't get open. I've had a few of my friends down here and they can't get it budge. Bill can't find any spells or curses so we're kind of at a loss."

Charlie took his wand and walked around the perimeter of the room and lit some magical lamps to relieve the gloom. Harry walked up to the door in question and looked at it closely. It was unremarkable in appearance. It was a plain wooden door with six raised panels, a simple brass handle and no hinges visible so he assumed it should open inward. He took hold of the handle and tried to turn it but it didn't budge. He put his hand against it and tried to feel what might be beyond. He felt nothing. He closed his eyes and tried to form an image of what might be on the other side. Perhaps another room, or tunnel, or maybe even a closet. It felt strangely solid. He thumped a panel with his fist and it felt solid, very solid. He stood facing the door, his eyes closed and he let a bit of the dragon surface. Something that had been nagging at his senses since he entered the room became more insistent as the dragon within woke up a bit.

He turned a bit from side to side to see if he could get a feel for what might be about. To his right the feeling felt stronger, if only just. He held out his hand and ran it over the brick work, then he started to sidestep along the wall. He came to the end of the wall that was directly opposite the tunnel and turned to examine the one adjacent. He was perhaps two thirds of the way along when the sense of something got much stronger. As he moved further along it dropped off again so he moved back to the spot that now stood out like a beacon.

His dragon senses were getting stronger and that other voice was beginning to grumble. There was something beyond the wall and the dragon didn't seem happy about it. Harry turned to his brothers and said,

"There's something back behind this wall. I think that door is a fake, a decoy. I can feel something here."

Bill and Charlie hurried over and the three of them began an intense examination of the brick work and masonry. Bill took out his wand and began to chant several different charms but to no avail. They pushed and prodded at this or that brick or section of wall. Harry was starting to get impatient because the dragon was getting more vocal in its grumbling.

“How about stepping back and letting me try something,” Harry said.

“Uh, take it easy, will you, Harry,” Charlie said anxiously. “We don’t know what’s on the other side. It might be something breakable, like a vault.”

Harry gave a little snort and backed up a few steps, once again pulling out the ironwood wand. He envisioned the bricks of the section of wall as small blocks of ice and then with a swish and flick made the change. Then he muttered ‘Incendio Draco’ and a wide flare of flame jumped from the tip of his wand and in short order melted the now ice bricks. A rectangular portal perhaps four feet by eight was revealed.

“Very smooth, Harry, very subtle,” Bill said with approval.

Harry didn’t answer. His senses were being overwhelmed by the sense of dragons, or something related. His other self had gone silent but very tense. Charlie relit his wand and began a cautious entry into the short passageway that was opened. Bill began to follow but then he looked back at Harry and said,

“Harry, are you alright?”

“I...I’m not sure, Bill. Something very strange is in there. Maybe you should take a look and then tell me what you see.”

“Alright, Harry,” Bill said calmly, but inside he was very concerned as he had never seen Harry shy back from anything before.

Harry could see Charlie’s figure disappear as he made a turn and Bill followed after. After a few moments Harry could hear the sound of two voices. The tones were such that he was sure nothing was dangerous but whatever it was wasn’t going to be very good. He saw light begin to illuminate the end of the passage and then Bill appeared. He stopped at the end of the passageway. He looked ill at ease.

“Harry. You should probably come see this. But I have to warn you. You aren’t going to like what you see.”

Harry nodded and then began walking towards his brother-in-law, who stood aside and let Harry go ahead. The passage way made a ninety degree turn to the left and went another dozen yards or so and then opened up into a large, roughly shaped chamber, perhaps even a natural cave. What Harry saw stunned him. In small niches in the wall to his right were perhaps twenty large eggs, different sizes and colors but obviously those of dragons. Directly ahead was the first of many free standing shelving units that contained a variety of jars of different sizes, filled with fluids in which floated all manner of objects, all of which appeared organic in nature.

Against the wall to the left was the worst of all. Several shiny metal tables were arranged in a line, separated by enough room to walk around. On the wall were racks of implements, many of which were obviously intended for cutting. Others he couldn't discern the use for which they were intended. It wasn't really necessary since the tables each held some preserved segment of a dragon. As the enormity of what he was seeing struck home Harry's brain exploded.

His mind was filled with the red hot roaring of the dragon. Incomprehensible words raged through his thoughts. His vision was clouded with red. Bill was the only one left in the room with him as Charlie had drifted down the long row of shelves, the circle of light from his wand visible on the walls of the chamber. Bill was looking at Harry. From the outside all he good see was his younger brother-in-law standing stock still, his eyes shut tight but with a hint of red as if someone was shining a light from the other side of his eyelids.

"Harry? Harry? Are you alright? Can you hear me, Harry?" Bill said as he got nearer.

He got to within three or four paces of Harry and he could feel the heat coming off the younger wizard as if it was a solid wall.

"Harry!" he yelled. "Harry! Get a grip on yourself. Calm down."

Harry was trying to calm down. He was trying to get he dragon under control as it roared it's outrage and cries for vengeance. As he battled with himself he felt another awareness intrude on his senses.

“Harry? Harry! What’s going on? I can feel you all the way out here,” came a familiar breathy voice.

Harry couldn’t answer but he did gather his will and pictured it as a blanket, to cover and suppress the dragon, to get it under control. It resisted at first but finally began to subside. In his mind’s eye he could see himself standing before the great green dragon, trying to rear above him but he held it fast with his eyes, his mother’s eyes, and it settled to all fours.

“I am you, you are me. We stand together or we don’t stand at all. Your anger is my anger but your raging gets us nowhere. We have dealt with those that have done this. Now we must deal with the consequences and I will need your help, but we cannot do anything with you ranting and raving. Please, calm down and let us get to work.”

The image of the dragon turned from him and walked away into the mists. Harry felt the rage bleed away and as he took several deep breaths to settle himself he had the absurd image of a massive reptile curled in a corner, pouting.

He opened his eyes and saw Bill staring at him. He gave a crooked smile and said,

“Sorry, Bill. This is all a bit upsetting. Almost lost my temper there for a minute. Had to get things under control.” Looking around he continued, “What the bloody hell is this place?”

“Charlie would know better than I would, but it looks like some sort of dissecting theater. I know you two joked about that first hybrid winding up down here in little jars. I guess it wasn’t such a joke after all,” Bill said.

Any further comment was cut off by a call from Charlie.

“Hey, you two, down this way,” he called out.

With their illuminated wands held in front of them, Bill and Harry made their way past the rows of shelving which eventually gave way to another corridor which after some fifty yards opened into a huge cavern. Harry ramped up the power of his wand and imagined the long lance of light that he had used on previous occasions. He played it against the far walls and saw other openings. At a distance it appeared that a crack had opened in the floor and there were several bridges over it. Charlie was standing on the one directly ahead.

“Does this all look a bit familiar to you?” Charlie called out.

Harry looked at Bill and said softly,

“It looks like the caverns under Gringotts where the vaults are.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Bill said as they walked towards Charlie.

Charlie came down off the bridge to meet them and looking around said,

“This is starting to get very strange, very quickly. If you look down this chasm it looks like more caverns and those passages other there,” he indicated the far walls, “look like they go on for a long way.”

Harry did a slow turn to try and take in all that he saw around him. He ran his hand through his already unruly hair and said,

“How is this possible? How can there be some many of these caves under London without anyone knowing about it. The muggles have dug all kinds of tunnels for sewers, waterpipes and the underground and they’ve never found any of this?”

“We don’t know if they ever did or not, Harry. You know how the Ministry keeps an eye on that sort of thing and obliviates anyone that stumbles across something magical. Besides, we don’t even know if all of this is in the same place that we think it is. Your Spatial Distortion Portal had a way of bending things around. Maybe the same is going on here. One thing’s for sure. We need to have a talk with the Goblins at Gringotts,” Bill finished.

“What about back there?” Harry asked as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Do you think those eggs are viable, Charlie?”

“I don’t know, but we can check. I’ve been through that a few times before. As to the rest I think the appropriate thing would be to bury it all somewhere, like you did with that second hybrid, Harry. Then maybe you can come back and burn the place out,” Charlie finished with a grim smile.

The three ‘brothers’ took one last look around and then began heading back up to the ‘normal’ section of the Mysteries Department. Once they finally were standing outside the open door with its wizard guard Charlie looked at Harry and said,

“Thanks for coming out and helping, Harry. I’m sorry you had to see all that. All things considered I imagine that it was pretty difficult for you.”

“You’re welcome, Charlie. Yes, it was pretty awful. Hopefully, it’s the last part of this whole mess and we can finally get it all cleaned up,” he replied and then looked at Bill. “Do you want to head over to Gringotts and let them know what’s going on?”

“I think we should. If we go poking around in those passageways and wind up in the vaults, it’s going to cause an uproar,” Bill said.

Harry just nodded and then with handshakes with Charlie the two went up to the Atrium and Disapparated to Diagon Alley near Gringotts. They walked together up the steps and the door Goblins swung the doors in for them. They stood in the entry foyer and a small Goblin bustled up.

“Mr. Harry Potter, how may the bank be of service to you?”

“Would you please ask Kandak if we could speak to him? It is a matter of great urgency,” Harry said.

“Right away, sir. One moment, please,” the Goblin said and the hurried off.

It was only a matter of a few minutes when the elder Goblin came up to them.

“Good day, young sir. I understand you have something you wish to discuss?”

“Yes, Kandak. Can we go to your office? We need to keep this quiet,” Harry said.

As usual, the stern features gave nothing away but his posture stiffened slightly.

“Of course, young sir. This way please.”

As they walked the Goblin looked up at Bill and said,

“You are Bill Weasley, formerly a curse breaker for the bank, are you not?”

“Yes, I am. But that was a few years ago. I’ve been teaching at Hogwarts since after the fall of Voldemort.”

The Goblin simply nodded and when they reached the door to his office he swung the door in and gestured for them to go inside. He walked around to his seat behind his desk and gestured for them to sit down.

“Now, what is of such urgency and how may the bank assist you?” Kandak asked.

Harry leaned forward and began to describe what had transpired that morning. When he got to the part about finding the network of caverns connected directly to the Mysteries Department Harry saw emotion on the face of the Goblin for the first time. He appeared alarmed and angry. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a hand bell and shook it vigorously. It seemed an instant and two Goblins appeared in the doorway. Kandak nearly shouted at them in Gobbledygook and they ran off in different directions. Then he turned back towards the two wizards.

"I beg your pardon for my abrupt behavior but this is at once very important and very upsetting. We will have to thoroughly investigate this from our vault caverns. I would ask that the Ministry provide us access from those newly uncovered caverns. If nothing else we have a serious security issue to resolve. It may also answer an unresolved question about how a certain vault was violated some years ago."

Harry flashed on a vault and a number, seven hundred and thirteen. He looked at Kandak and said the number.

"Precisely, young sir."

Harry and Bill left a few minutes later, having told Kandak that they would talk to the Ministry about getting permission to have the Goblins help explore the caverns. After leaving the bank they walked along the Alley for a bit. They stopped and watched as the various witches and wizards went about their business. Harry looked up at his taller 'brother' and said,

"It looks so simple from here, Bill. But what is really going on below the surface? What don't we see? Is it like the Portal? You move from here to there and get where you want to go but off to the sides there's all that unknown."

"I don't know, Harry. I've seen some pretty strange things in my career with Gringotts. And think of all the strangeness you've encountered. Hell, think of all the strangeness you embody," he said looking down at Harry with a small smile to take some of the sting from those last words. "I have a feeling you will spend a good deal of your life dealing with strange things. But I don't think anyone is better suited to deal with them."

Harry gave a small nod and the two continued to ponder the implications as they stood watching the activity along the Alley.

Harry's Future, Part 49

Kreacher opened the door to the manor house at Meadow Crest and quietly bowed Harry in. His master was quiet and evidently very disturbed. Kreacher knew the quiet wouldn't last long as the sound of rapid footsteps echoed down the hallway. As Ginny and Abigail approached at a run, Kreacher silently moved away towards the kitchen to oversee Nibs and finish preparing dinner.

"Harry, for the love of Merlin. What happened?" Ginny asked as she came to a stop in front of her husband.

For no real reason Harry assumed that James was taking a nap. He thought that was a shame, he would have really liked to have been able to hold his son right now. He did gather Ginny into his arms and after a moment he reached out to take hold of Abigail who had followed closely along behind. He could feel their grips tighten about him and he drew that feeling of security to himself. He let out a long sigh and eased his hold on them. Ginny looked up at him, seeing the look on his face and more quietly this time asked,

"What happened, sweetheart?"

"Suffice to say that what I saw in Mysteries was more than a little disturbing. Let's go into the living room and I'll try to explain it all," he said in a tired voice.

With an arm around the shoulders of Ginny and Abigail, Harry walked with them to the entrance to the living room. He stopped and called down the hallway.

"Kreacher?"

"Yes, Master Harry?"

"Could you bring some tea in here, please?"

"Coming right away, Master Harry."

He moved the little group into the spacious room and they took seats with Harry in the middle. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment but not really seeing anything, then he looked down with a sigh again.

“As you remember, I went with Charlie and Bill to see if I could help them figure out how to open a door that Charlie had found in a room off of the Brain Room. Remember that one, Ginny?”

He felt his wife shudder at the remembrance and she said,

“How could I forget any part of that awful night?”

Harry nodded then continued.

“Well, there were a couple of doors along the back wall of the Brain room and one opened to a corridor that led down for a few hundred yards and ended at another room that had a few more doors. Charlie said two were for store rooms but the other they just couldn’t get open.”

He was interrupted by the entrance of Nibs with a tray that held a pot of tea, three cups and some biscuits on a plate. He put the tray on a small table near where they were sitting and then bowed his way back out of the room. Harry absently thought he’d have to explain that all that bowing wasn’t necessary. Ginny poured for the three of them and then handed Harry his. He took a sip and sighed.

He then proceeded to tell the rest of the tale. How he thought there was something wrong with the door and looking for and finding the secret passageway, about Bill and Charlie going ahead and then he following. He talked about his struggle with the dragon within when he saw what the secret room contained.

“It was the most horrendous thing I’ve ever seen in my life, Gin. It was all I could do to keep from going dragon and tearing the place apart. I guess that’s when Abigail felt what was going on,” he said, looking down at his ward.

She looked back at him with a sad smile and took hold of his free hand. Harry gave her hand a squeeze and continued his story. He

told them about finally getting the dragon under control and he and Bill following after Charlie and seeing the huge cavern and all the passageways and the chasm and all the rest.

He sipped some more tea and then explained the trip to Gringotts and the discussion with Kandak and his reaction. He finished up with his discussion with Bill as they stood outside the bank on Diagon Alley, watching all the witches and wizards going about their business.

“That might be the most upsetting part of all, Ginny. I mean, intellectually I knew the possibility of something like what we found existing, but to see it there, so real, was bad enough. But the idea that there might be all this strangeness under the surface and how I wind up in the middle of it is what really upset me. Maybe I was hoping that when I left the Ministry I was leaving it all behind, but it doesn’t look that way.”

Ginny took hold of Harry’s hand with both of hers and looked into those beautiful green eyes that she loved so much, then she smiled a bit and said,

“Did you really think that you could do that, Harry? Look at all those books that you’ve bought and all the ones you’ll likely buy in the future. You’re always trying to learn something new about magic, and let’s face it. There’s an awful lot of strangeness in just the ordinary kinds of magic. Some of the stuff you take an interest in borders on the bizarre. I’ve known you a long time now, and there’s one thing I know for sure. When you see something that’s wrong, you try and make it right. And when you see something that you don’t understand you try and figure it out. But you never stop seeing, Harry. You never look away, you never say ‘that’s someone else’s problem’. Like I said to you years ago, you’re a problem solver, my love. This is just another problem,” she said with a smile. “I think you’re just feeling out of sorts because of what you saw. If you give it some time I think you’ll realize that what you’re doing now is picking up the pieces from what Riddle left behind. Just think of it as cleaning up the debris before you start rebuilding and that should make you feel better.”

Harry gave her a more genuine smile and after putting his tea cup down, gave her a one armed hug. She kissed his cheek and said,

"If you can spare me, I'll go check on dinner."

Harry nodded and watched her leave the living room. He then looked at Abigail and said,

"So, little one, how nasty a turn did I give you?"

"Probably about the same as the one I gave you when we both felt Ginny's labor pains. Fortunately I was just reading so all I did was drop my book. I was feeling kind of warm for a bit as well. You were really throwing off some heat this time," she said.

"If any place ever needed a good bonfire, it's that one. I'm hoping that Charlie can find a place where those eggs can be safely hatched. Since they all looked somewhat different I'd have to think the eggs were stolen from clutches in the wild. Having seen an angry mother trying to guard her eggs, I can imagine what that was all about. It makes me kind of ashamed when I think of what we were doing with that first challenge at the Triwizard's Tournament."

"Harry, you were a fourth year. It wasn't like you had anything to do with setting that up. What choice did you have?" Abigail asked.

"I understand that, little one, but it still makes me feel bad," he said with a sigh, "Ah well, at least we uncovered that whole mess and it can be set to rights. I'd imagine those caves are going to be swarming with Goblins at some point," he said and then snorted. "I wonder how many of the so called traditionalists out there will think it was some sort of plot of the Goblins so they could sneak into the Ministry and revolt again."

"Probably more than a few, Harry. Do you really think that was how that Professor Quirrel managed to sneak into the Gringotts vaults when you were a first year?"

"I don't know, little one. On the one hand it would explain it, but on the other, if he could get into that part of the Mysteries Department why did they have so much trouble getting to the Prophecy about me and Voldemort," Harry mused.

"Hmm, I remember that story, Harry. You told me all about that night. Wasn't the key that only someone involved in the prophecy could get access to it? So even if they were in the Prophecy section, which they were, you had to touch the particular globe, not one of them. So all kinds of Riddle's people could have been in and out of the department, right?" she asked.

"Maybe, I don't know, I guess so," Harry said, scrubbing at his face, something he only did when he was feeling particularly tired. "I'm in no shape to be doing any deep thinking at the moment. I'll feel better after some dinner and a good night's sleep."

As if on cue, Nibs popped his head around the edge of the entrance to the living room and announced that dinner was being served in the dining room. Harry just nodded his acknowledgement and stood up along with Abigail, who took his hand in both of hers and together they made their way to the dining room. Four place settings were arranged at one end of the long table. Ginny was already there with James in his carrier resting on the table next to her and Teddy sitting in his place looking at Harry as he and Abigail entered.

"Are you ok, Harry?" the boy asked.

"More or less, Ted. I'm tired and hungry, so a good dinner and early night should see me past most of it. Try not to worry about it. Dinner looks terrific," the last he said to Ginny.

"Enough talking. Sit yourself down and eat," Ginny said in a fair imitation of her mother.

Harry smiled and shook his head as he took his place at the table. He was hungry but he was also tired and still a little depressed so he only managed two helpings of everything. By the time he was done the combination of the day's efforts and stress and his relatively full stomach had him nearly dozing off at the table. Ginny shook her head and told him to get himself off to bed. Before he did he was asked for and gave permission for Abigail and Teddy to use the wizards chess

set in the library. While Abigail was not a frequent player she was still able to play fairly well.

Harry's sleep that night was a hazy mix of dreams and near dreams. He spent a fair amount of time 'listening' to the muttered grumblings of the dragon. In the morning when he had the opportunity to think about it, he surmised that his more vivid dreams were driven by the anger he had barely managed to control the day before. He dreamed he was rampaging through caverns and passageways flaming anything and everything in his path. After waking up he felt better, if still a bit tired. He was sure that his improved mood was in part the result of a certain feeling of smug self satisfaction emanating from that small corner in his mind where the dragon spent most of its time. Apparently someone had enjoyed last night's dreams.

Ginny was already up and out of the room as was James. Harry pulled on some clothes and made his way to the kitchen and some breakfast. He found a cup of tea already waiting for him next to his place setting and he sighed with deep satisfaction over the first cuppa of the day. Kreacher floated a platter across the kitchen and brought it to rest on the counter in front of his master.

"Master Harry is feeling better this morning?"

"Yes, Kreacher. Thank you. I'm sure I'll feel even better after a good breakfast and a second cup of tea, but I'm pretty sure there's going to be a nap inserted in the day somewhere," Harry said with a smile.

"It is good that Master Harry has the opportunity to rest," the little house elf replied.

"And what about you, Kreacher? Are you able to rest now that you have Dinkle and Nibs to help?"

"Kreacher does not take naps but Kreacher does not have to work so hard or do so much so that is like resting for a house elf. Kreacher feels well."

"That's terrific, Kreacher. I'm very happy it's working out for you."

Kreacher gave Harry a smile and went back towards the stove. Harry was working through his second helping when Ginny and Teddy came into the kitchen.

"Well, good morning, sleepy head. Are you feeling any better this morning?" Ginny asked.

"I'm getting there, Gin. I had some strange dreams but I did get a fair amount of sleep."

"I can imagine about those dreams. You were pretty restless there for a while and a couple of times I had to slide clear to the other side of the bed you were throwing off so much heat," she said with a smile. "And you were doing a lot of mumbling in your sleep."

"Sorry about that. My big friend up here," he began, tapping his forehead, "was pretty active last night."

"It's ok, sweetheart. As long as you're feeling better."

"Have you two had breakfast yet?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes. We were upstairs with Abigail going over some of the drawings she's been working on. I heard back from the publishers and they are very interested in seeing what we have in mind."

"That's terrific. I'm nearly done here. It looks like a good day for flying. We can give Ted a good workout this morning," Harry said with a smile.

Ted smiled in return as he nodded his agreement. Harry gulped down the last of his breakfast and finished off his tea. Then they went to retrieve their brooms from, of all places, a broom closet that had been built underneath the staircase leading upstairs. When Harry had first seen the space under the stairs he looked in and said,

"You could sleep two in here."

Ginny responded with a slap on the arm and then a tight hug. It was agreed that it would be used for storing their brooms and flying gear.

Harry had purchased several spares to be on hand for any visitors that wanted to take advantage of the open spaces.

In short order they were outside. After the first week of lessons and with Teddy feeling more comfortable, Harry had joined in. He would lead his godson above the field in a series of maneuvers and Ginny would watch from a suitable vantage point, calling out encouragement and suggestions. With such expert guidance Teddy was making rapid progress.

This day's session was helping Harry shrug off the last of his morose mood from the previous day. He wasn't going to forget about what he saw, but at least he could now look at it as a problem to be solved, as Ginny had so wisely suggested. He couldn't let himself get too wrapped up in his flying since he still needed to stay below the tree line so he couldn't get much above fifty feet, therefore his more elaborate maneuvering had to be left for another day and place.

After a while they came in for a landing and Harry looked at the youngster and said,

"You're really doing a great job up there, Ted. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see you flying for a house team at some point."

Teddy's face split into a big smile. Ginny was relieved to see that Harry was quickly shedding the unhappiness from the day before but she had already set in motion what she hoped would put him back in the frame of mind he been in since the beginning of the summer. The first few weeks were the happiest she had seen him in a very long time and she wanted that back for him.

Her plan came to fruition that Saturday. Harry was out on the lawn looking at the various flowerbeds and shrubbery, wondering what he was going to have to do to make sure it all survived. He remembered what it was like having to weed and trim in Uncle Vernon's garden but it didn't impart any knowledge as to what was required to keep everything alive. He was just considering the likelihood of having to bring in professional help when he heard some footsteps on the gravel path coming from the wood.

"Hello, Harry dear, how are you getting on?"

"Mum? Dad? I didn't know you were coming today," Harry said.

"What are you saying, dear? We have to make arrangements before we can drop by?"

"Well, of course not," Harry said seriously, "I was just surprised is all. Pleasantly surprised."

"Oh, Harry, I was just teasing you. Actually, Ginny invited us to come over. I suspect a family gather is in the offing," Molly Weasley said as she wrapped her son in a big hug.

"Hmm, I thought she was making a lot of trips to the owlry. Not that I'd mind, of course. It's a brilliant idea," he said with a smile. "I assume you arrived by the Popular?" this being directed to his dad.

"Of course, son. We're getting a bit on in years for using brooms and it's a marvelous day for a drive," Arthur Weasley replied.

Abigail and Teddy were the next members of the greeting committee to meet the elder Weasleys. Ginny stayed inside with James, both of whom received their share of hugs, kisses, and fuss. They all settled into the living room for a family chat.

"So, Harry. How are you getting on?" Arthur asked.

"I'm doing alright, Dad. I suppose you heard about what happened."

"Yes, indeed. There was no general announcement of course, but Charlie did inform the Minister and Director Grimsson about what you uncovered and the Department Heads were filled in. The Director had Hermione coordinate with her contacts in the Goblin community and a search team of sorts has been formed and will begin exploration on Monday. The Gringotts Goblins are already investigating from their side to see if there is any connection between the two sets of caverns. Charlie told me how you reacted to the whole mess."

"It was pretty ugly, that's true, but at least it proved I was able to keep things under control. It seems as if all my anger is sort of embodied in the dragon you might say. And when I had to, I was able to face it down so I guess I don't have to worry about the change happening on its own if I get really upset," Harry said.

"I'm glad to see you were able to find a bright spot in all that, son," Mr. Weasley said proudly.

Harry smiled but suppressed the shrug. Any further conversation was interrupted by the sounds of the arrival of some very welcome guests. Fleur swept into the room just as Harry stood up. He was quickly engulfed by a pair of slender and deceptively strong arms. Harry wondered if under the smooth skin were steel cables. Before Fleur let him go he felt another pair of arms wrapping around his legs.

"Hello, Fleur and hello to you, Miss Victoire," Harry said with a grin.

"'lo, Uncky 'arry."

"That's uncle Harry, Victoire. Try and say 'uncle'.

"Uncle 'arry," came the very serious reply.

"That's my girl. Very good."

As the morning progressed towards noon most of the rest of the Weasley clan had arrived. As usual George and Angelina would be there towards late afternoon, once the busiest part of the day had passed. Harry always marveled at how so many people could find the time from their busy lives to offer their support when they thought he needed it. His subsequent feelings of love and gratitude set the pattern for the rest of his life. He never let an opportunity pass, no matter how great or small, to help whomever in his extended family needed it.

After Charlie and Eleanor had arrived he was able to do a small but important favor for El. Charlie was his usual cheerful self, shaking hands with Harry with a smile and thanking him again for helping him with the search. When he went off to the kitchen to see what was

being offered for lunch, Eleanor pulled Harry aside and spoke to him in low tones.

“Harry, I need to ask you to do something for me.”

“Of course, El, name it,” Harry said.

“I need you to talk to Charlie. He’s feeling pretty bad about what happened in the Mysteries Department. He feels guilty about pulling you into it and what you went through. It’s really tearing at him. Could you talk to him about it? Try and cheer him up?”

“Of course I will. It wasn’t like he tied me up and forced me to go. Don’t worry. I’ll bring him around,” Harry said with a grin.

His opportunity came shortly after lunch. Many of the day’s guests had gone outside to watch some of the family that had taken to the sky over the meadow. Harry had intercepted Charlie before he had a chance to mount up.

“A word in your ear, Charlie?”

“Certainly, Harry. What’s on your mind?” Charlie asked with what Harry could tell was a forced cheerfulness.

“There’s no reason for you to feel any kind of responsibility for what happened the other day down in Mysteries. I had volunteered my help from the start and there wasn’t anything to indicate what we might find. In fact, I probably had a better idea of what was coming than either you or Bill,” Harry said quietly.

Charlie’s brittle smile had left his face to be replaced with a much more somber expression. He looked at his brother in law and said,

“I know all that, Harry, but once Bill and I saw what was in there, I shouldn’t have let you come in. I should have known, better than just about anyone, what kind of reaction your dragon side would have had. I’m sorry for what I put you through.”

Harry looked at Charlie and gave him one of those crooked half smiles and said, shaking his head a bit,

“Charlie, you know I think of you as one of my big brothers. But do you really think, big brother, that you could have stopped me from going into that room, once I decided to. The only one responsible for my being there was me. It was rough, that’s true, but it wasn’t all that bad and it did help prove I can control that side of me when I have to. Do me a favor will you, big brother? Lighten up a little. El is concerned about you, so do it for her if for no other reason.”

Charlie briefly locked eyes with Harry and then with a nod and quick smile he gave Harry a clap on the shoulder and then went in search of Eleanor and his broom. Harry watched him walk away, a small smile on his face. By the time dinner was ready everyone had worked up a good appetite and Nibs was practically beside himself with excitement. His duties at Hogwarts had him preparing just a small part of any of the meals. At Meadow Crest he was able to have a hand in practically everything, except dessert. With Master Harry’s fondness for sweets, Kreacher insisted on taking care of that himself.

Everyone was seated in the dining room, helping themselves to the wonders of Kreacher and Nibs’ kitchen when Harry once again felt that faint, warm touch on the back of his head and neck. His eyes immediately sought out Abigail and she returned his look with raised eyebrows and slight nod in the affirmative. Harry resolved to discuss it with her at the earliest opportunity. The rest of the meal passed without incident and most of the guests took their leave not too long afterward. The general consensus was that while Harry was in a better mood he could still use another early night to complete the ‘healing’.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were the last to leave but only after Molly had given Harry a thorough once over. He did not, however, go directly to bed. He remained in the library and did some reading. He had gotten through a few chapters of a fairly old tome on spell creation when he heard a soft knock on the edge of the doorframe. He never closed the door when he was in the room. He looked up and saw Abigail standing in the doorway expectantly.

"May I?" she asked in that airy voice.

"Of course, little one," Harry said with a smile.

She walked quietly to the chair closest to Harry and sat down and looked at him. Harry set the book he was reading down on the small table beside his chair and looked back at her.

"So, to what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"Do I have to have a specific reason to want to spend time with you, Harry?" she replied.

"Well, of course not, but I just thought..." he tailed off.

She gave him a smile, not a sad one, but one that spoke of many things unsaid.

"You know, Harry, I sometimes wonder that with all we've been through together, with our special connection, that I might understand you better than anyone else, maybe even better than yourself. You still don't understand, really understand, what we all see in you. Why we admire and love you the way we do," she said in a voice that sounded much older and wiser than her seventeen years.

He looked at her, his green eyes wide and questioning, his look puzzled. She looked back at him with a steady gaze.

"I do a lot of thinking when I'm painting or drawing, maybe too much. I think about you a lot. And I think that had the circumstances been very different, the way I feel about you would be very different, too."

At this point she had to laugh a little as Harry's eyes went very wide and he looked somewhat alarmed.

"Don't get excited, Harry. I said if things had been very different. I'm very happy that things are the way they are and that you are my father and big brother and teacher and protector all rolled into one. But I also know that you've been through a great deal these last years and I don't think you've really had the chance to get your feet

under you as far as your feelings and emotions are concerned. You've been really happy these last few weeks with James and the new house and leaving the Ministry and then this business with that room whipped you right back to the old ways again. I can feel it."

As she said this she reached out with her small hand, inviting Harry to take it in his, which he did.

"We all know it, more or less. That's why everyone is so willing to be here when you need us. There's a lot of love for you in this family Harry. Use it to hold you up until you can get your feet on firmer ground. You've spent nearly a quarter of a century being knocked about and pulled this way and that. Wrap yourself in that love and use it to cushion yourself. You've been protecting us for long enough. Let us protect you for a while."

When Harry thought back on this mostly one sided conversation in the years to come it amazed him that he hadn't started to cry or even to tear up. Perhaps it was the soft, serious way that Abigail had spoken, perhaps it was his fatigue. He was never able to understand it. He did marvel at what his diminutive ward, or more correctly, his eldest child had said. After a few moments he did manage to find his voice.

"Earlier, at dinner, it was her again, wasn't it? My mother, I mean."

"Of course it was, Harry. I probably shouldn't say this, but she's never very far from you. It seems like the bond grows stronger each time she touches you like that. It's especially strong here in the house. It's there with your father as well, but with your mother it's much stronger. Maybe it's tied in with the protective magic, I'm not sure. She's very happy with the way things have worked out for you, Harry. And she absolutely adores James. But she does worry about you, especially when you're unhappy," Abigail said and then gave Harry an impish grin. "I know you tease us when you call us your guardian angels but it appears you really do have one."

Harry gave a small smile back and then tugged on Abigail's hand and pulled her to him and held her tightly for a while. She replied in

kind. After a time he eased his grip and they were able to look at each other and he said,

“I guess we’ve done pretty well for ourselves haven’t we? A pair of orphans who found real family.”

“That’s right, Harry. But I think you mean former orphans.”

Harry’s sleep that night was much more peaceful and when he awoke he felt refreshed. He was feeling so good in fact he decided he would give his draconic self a bit of flight time so after a serious breakfast, he kissed Ginny farewell and Disapparated to that spot in the hills behind Hogsmeade with which he had come to be so familiar. It was moderately overcast which would serve Harry well and he spent several hours cruising above the cloud layer, dipping, diving and just thoroughly enjoying his time on the wing. He was soaring over a particularly rugged area when his dragon senses picked up something strange, a feeling of ‘something’s not right’.

Since the area was relatively unpopulated he dropped lower and began to scan the craggy landscape with his keen dragon vision. It wasn’t long before a bright patch of color caught his eye against the backdrop of dark rock. Passing lower he could see it was a person, lying at the bottom of a short steep section of rock. There was no movement but when he focused he could pick up a faint, but steady heartbeat. He dropped to land on a narrow ledge above where the person was lying.

Reaching down with his long neck, Harry was able to make a careful examination and saw that it was a man, a bit larger than Harry in his human form, but of a more muscular build. He was dressed in a bright yellow jacket and jeans, with rugged looking hiking boots. A small backpack was on the ground next to him. His clothes were torn here and there, so Harry assumed he had slipped and slid down the rock face. Harry had to come to a decision and quickly. His senses told him that the man was in need of serious help. Even if he were to fly to the nearest village or town and look for help in human form it would be hours before the man would be reached.

There wasn't enough room for him to get to the man in dragon form so he changed back and took out his wand and pointed it at the unconscious form. He said 'wingardium leviosa' and the body slowly lifted from the rocky ground as Harry gently floated him up to come to rest on the ledge. Tucking the wand back into his belt, he went 'dragon' again and with great care and uncharacteristic delicacy lifted the man in his foreclaws. He was glad his knee had healed so well because he had to put a great deal of pressure on his hind legs to assist his wings as they swept deeply to lift off with his burden tucked up tight to his chest.

During his flight he had noticed a small town not too far by air from where he found the trekker. He knew he couldn't just drop into the middle of the town center so he circled high above until he saw what he was looking for. About a mile from the town was a large clearing. He made sure he fixed the area closer to the edge of the town in his mind's eye and then swooped in to land. He gently laid the man on the grass and then changed. Without his wand he levitated the man and holding him by the arm he Disapparated to the edge of town. He could hear some voices from not too far away as he gently let the man down to the ground. Then as loud as he could he yelled out,

"I need help over here," and when he heard voices raised in response he Disapparated back to the clearing.

From there he Disapparated directly back to the edge of Hogsmeade and then made use of the fireplace in the little rented house to make his way back to Meadow Crest. He was home in time for a late lunch. While he was eating Ginny strolled into the kitchen, James cradled in her arms.

"So how was your flying, Harry?"

"It was fine, Gin. I think my big friend should be content for a while. It was a nice day to fly," he said.

"I'm glad you had a good time. Oh, by the way. Ron was by while you were gone. He just wanted to see how you were doing. When I told him where you were he figured that was a good indication you were doing alright," she said with a smile, then continued. "Could I impose

on you to keep an eye on James for a while after you finish eating? I have some work to get done. Hagrid sent some more material and I need to go through it.”

“Of course, I’d be happy to,” Harry replied with a grin.

He was as good as his word and spent the whole rest of the afternoon with his son. He brought him into the library and read to him until he fell asleep. Both Abigail and Teddy stopped in for brief visits and then settled into a quiet game of chess. Well, relatively quiet. The individual combats were executed with brevity and with minimal shouts and exhortations. Whoever had spelled these pieces had done an excellent job of giving them some situational awareness and they behaved as if they knew there was a sleeping infant nearby. All in all it was a good day for Harry.

The next day brought a bit of a bump, however, with a visit from Hermione. Kreacher welcomed her at the front door and escorted her to the library where Harry was making further progress into the old tome he was working on. When Kreacher announced Hermione Harry looked up with a smile.

“Hermione, what a nice surprise. What brings you out here?” Harry asked.

“I was wondering if you know anything about this?” she asked, handing Harry a folded newspaper.

It was a section of the London Times. The headline for the story read, ‘Lost Trekker Found Miles From Last Known Location’.

The story went on to tell about a hiker that was overdue in the Scottish Highlands and had miraculously appeared at the edge of a small town a number of miles from where he was expected to be. The man was unconscious when found by townspeople responding to a shouted plea for help. He had heavy bruising to the head and a concussion as well as broken ribs, a wrenched knee and a number of cuts and contusions. It was pretty obvious that he couldn’t have walked out in that condition.

The story also told of how when the man awoke later that evening he told of feeling, almost as if in a dream, of being lifted up and flying through the air and then being put down again. He had no idea how he had gotten there nor could he remember anything beyond slipping and sliding off the ledge he had been walking on. Before he slipped into a sedated sleep he muttered something about angels.

Authorities were asking for anyone who might have seen something unusual to come forward. When Harry had finished reading the article he looked up at Hermione but said nothing. She fixed him with her best 'Hermione' look and said,

"Ron told me when he came home yesterday that you were out, flying as the dragon up in the Highlands. Did you have something to do with this?" she asked.

"Hermione, whatever would make you think something like that," he asked, his face a mask of innocence.

"Because I know you were up there and I know that if you happened to come across someone in trouble you wouldn't, couldn't leave them there. So, tell me what went on," she said.

"Um, no offense intended, Hermione, but why should I have to do that?" Harry asked.

"Firstly, and most importantly because I am your friend and family and I get concerned when you expose yourself like this. Secondly, because Minister Shacklebolt asked me to come out here and find out if you had anything to do with it. It seems he takes a personal interest in a certain unregistered animagus," she said, folding her arms and looking sternly at him.

"Alright, yes it was me. I was up there flying around, having a great time after everything that happened last week. I saw a brightly colored something or other down on the ground and I went to take a look. It turned out to be a fallen hiker and I managed to carry him out and get him somewhere he could get help. Like you said, I couldn't just leave him there."

“Well, thank you for being honest with me, finally,” she said in her best exasperated voice. “That being the case the Minister said to tell you ‘well done’ but please try and be careful. If the muggles start seeing a bloody great dragon in the skies of Scotland it’s only going to make things difficult for you. There’s already enough speculation about what’s been going on lately,” she finished.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Your connection to the dragon that saved Hogwarts and showed up at Halloween, on top of what was just found in Mysteries has people talking is what I mean. The Patrollers have heard some people talking about the ‘Dragon Wizard’ and they mean you.”

“Oh, dear,” was all Harry said.

“That’s right. So try and keep things a bit more low key, will you, Harry?” she said with a small smile.

Harry just nodded and he stood up to see Hermione to the door. With a parting hug she left to go back to the Ministry and report to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Harry walked back to the library in thought. He resumed his seat and thought about this new title. He had been the ‘boy who lived’ then mistakenly ‘the Heir of Slytherin’. The Centaurs called him the ‘Serpent Slayer’ and then the ‘Serpent King’ and now some witches and wizards were calling him ‘Dragon Wizard’. Why wasn’t being just ‘Harry Potter’ enough?

The next significant event of the summer was his birthday, the first in the new home and Ginny pulled out all the stops. Not only was the family invited but many of his friends from the Ministry and Hogwarts. As a special surprise, the Delacours were there, spending part of their holidays with Bill and Fleur. He hadn’t seen them in a while and he was happy they were able to attend. He was startled to see how grown up the seventeen year old Gabrielle looked.

She was not quite as tall as Fleur but she had filled out more, giving her a curvy, more mature look than her seventeen years would suggest. She did however follow in her sister’s footsteps in the way

that she greeted her 'big brother'. When she saw him for the first time that day she let out a squeal and hurried up to him with arms wide. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him tightly. She bestowed the customary kisses on each cheek and then pulled him close again. When she finally let go she stepped back. There was none of the giggly, awestruck girl. She was poised and composed and smiled widely.

"Brother 'arry, eet ees wonderful to see you again. My eengleesh ees much better, yes?"

"It is, Gabrielle. Your English is far better than my French could ever be," Harry said then shook his head. "My goodness, you look so grown up. It's heard to believe you're the same girl I found at the bottom of the lake at Hogwarts."

At this compliment she did blush a bit and Harry could see the same girl prone to giggles but it passed quickly. She looked back at Harry with those bright blue eyes, so much like Fleur's and said,

"You deed not expect me to stay a leetle girl all my life did you, mon frere?" she asked.

"No, of course not, but it's still an amazing thing. Come on, let's bring your folks inside so they can see James. I guess that makes you his Aunt Gabi, wouldn't it?"

"Oui, 'arry, eet would but I would prefer Aunt Gabrielle. Gabi is a leetle girls name," she said with a grin.

Harry laughed and nodded and after a handshake for Mr. Delacour and hug for his wife he led them inside for a tour and to see James. Gabrielle made a great fuss over her 'nephew' and after asking for and getting permission to hold him she cuddled him and gave the baby a number of kisses. Harry could see that the mothering instinct was just as strong in Gabrielle as it was in Fleur. Harry only hoped that it would be directed at the younger members of the family. One silver haired guardian angel was more than sufficient.

The party was a great event. At Harry's insistence the invitations had contained a request not to bring presents. The restriction was generally adhered to although there were a few surreptitious exceptions. Angelina had slipped him his own box of the biscuits he loved so much. Ron gave him a book on chess strategy and Abigail quietly pressed a small object into his hand that turned out to be a small but highly detailed figurine of a dragon that looked uncannily like Harry in his dragon form. She never said how she had managed the likeness.

Later in the day, as guests had broken up into smaller groups, Harry spent his time moving about playing host as much as 'birthday boy'. As he stood talking Quidditch with Charlie, Bill and Eleanor he noticed a small group sitting on lounge chairs not too far away. It was Fleur, Abigail and Gabrielle. He doubted any gathering of movie stars or models could have boasted a better looking trio. As it was, the two silver haired and one black haired beauties were talking quietly, with occasional laughs.

As if sensing his gaze, Abigail looked up and directly at him with a smile. Then she turned to her two friends and whispered something and then the three all looked at Harry and simultaneously blew him kisses. He shook his head and smiled back at them, remembering what Abigail had told him that night in the library.

It was a wonderful day and after the guests had all left he sat in the living room with his family. There was a bit of seriousness in the discussion however. It was the last day of July and Teddy was due to leave the next day. It had been great fun having him there. He had been an enthusiastic broom flying student and fun companion for Abigail. He was understandably subdued as they sat and discussed the day.

"So, Ted, I hope you've enjoyed your time here?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yeah, Harry. It's been great. Nan is really terrific but there's only so much I can do there. All the space here to fly and explore and being around Abigail has been really cool."

“Hmmm, that’s good to hear because I contacted your grandmother last week and we agreed you could stay until Quidditch camp starts. How’s that sound?”

“Oh wow, cool, thanks, Harry. That’s great,” Teddy nearly yelled.

Those first weeks of August proved to be rather busy ones. Charlie came by several times to have meetings with Harry and Bill to finish up the arrangements for camp. The support from the QUABBLE people eased the burden somewhat as they provided some additional administrative assistance that helped offset Charlie’s involvement in the Mysteries Department investigation. Meadow Crest also hosted a meeting between representatives of the book publishers and Ginny, Charlie and Abigail. Hagrid had sent word that he was happy to let them deal with this part of the project.

By the time the camp was due to begin a deal had been reached for publishing the book with an additional offer for Abigail about doing some free lance illustrating on other projects. Charlie had also reported that they were starting to make some headway with the files and materials being uncovered. Harry had also closed the deal for the purchase of the little house in Hogsmeade that would serve as a transit point on the Floo network for him to go back and forth to Hogwarts as well as to stay over if it ever became necessary.

The day before the camp was to begin was a trying one at the Potter household. It was time for Teddy to leave. Andromeda Tonks arrived late in the afternoon to join them for a farewell dinner of sorts and in a private conversation thanked Harry profusely for the time he spent with the boy. She had enjoyed her summer of travel very much but she had to admit she had missed Teddy and was glad to be taking him home.

When the time came for him to go, there were many hugs and a few tears and promises for frequent visits. To facilitate this Harry gave Andromeda a large supply of floo powder and told Ted he was welcome at any time, particularly on weekends. After seeing Teddy and his grandmother on their way from the small building in the rear courtyard Harry walked slowly back into the house, which seemed just a bit empty at the moment. It had been fun having his godson

around and it made him a little anxious to have James grow up just a touch faster.

He left for camp the following morning just as the sun was coming up. Ginny was only going to be able to manage one or two appearances for half a day or so; not wanting to place too much of a burden on her mother for babysitting chores, or so she said. Harry suspected it had more to do with not wanting to be away from James for any extended period of time. She also claimed that with the deal made on the book she needed to spend more time on that in the coming weeks. Harry merely smiled and nodded as he listened but he wasn't buying anything she was trying to sell.

Regardless of circumstances Harry was happy to immerse himself into the full two weeks of camp for the first time since its inception. He offered the opening welcome and gave the initial evaluation his full attention. Much as he had during his visit with Ginny to the Beauxbaton camp on their honeymoon he was able to absorb amazing amounts of detail watching the flyers individually and in groups. When it came time to sit down with the other 'coaches' they were duly impressed, and several flat out amazed, at the information he was able to provide on each flyer. Bill jokingly suggested that Harry's ability to absorb information was rivaled only by his ability to absorb food.

Then they all got down to the real work, or play, depending on your point of view. Flyers were separated by experience, ability and position preference. Harry worked with two other Seekers, one a retired professional, the other a former standout as a student at Hogwarts a dozen or so years before Harry first attended. With a healed knee and a clear head, Harry was having the time of his life doing the two things he loved most, flying and teaching.

He would stay for the dinners and then take the floo network home where he was able to spend some time with James while Ginny was able to take some time for herself. All in all it was two of the best weeks he could imagine. After some discussion it was decided, at Ginny's insistence, that she and her parents would see to getting Abigail to the train station for her last trip up and Harry would meet her at the station.

As Harry stood on the platform at Hogsmeade, dressed in new black robes with the Hogwarts emblem, denoting his status as a true Professor, he watched as the column of black smoke from the Express became visible in the distance. He felt that he had come to another one of those crossroads in his life. His life as an active fighter of the dark arts was over, at least officially. He was now a family man and an educator. He would be approaching the problem of the dark arts from a different direction that he hoped wouldn't take such a toll on his body and his family's nerves. As he watched the train slowly roll into the station he had to smile. Life was good.

Authors note: My dear friends, contrary to what I wrote in my last note, I've decided to bring this phase of Harry's life journey to an end. The story went much further than I had originally intended and as a result, I've neglected a project that I need to return to, that is the sequel to my first novel. But try not to be too upset. I plan to return to Harry after this project is finished, probably sometime early next year. I will pick up where this story leaves off with a working title of "Professor Potter". I've enjoyed creating this story for you and appreciate those of you who've taken the time to let me know what you thought. I look forward to returning to the world JKR provided to us and hope you'll be there to enjoy it.